

How to study Africa: from victimhood to agency

By John Lonsdale,
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On Monday 25 May 1959 Iain Macleod, then minister of labour in a British Conservative government, wrote privately to his prime minister, Harold Macmillan. It was a bad time for British rule in Africa. Eleven Kenyans had been clubbed to death at Hola detention camp after refusing to do the forced labour that was designed to reclaim them from their “hard core” allegiance to the Mau Mau rebellion [1].

There was also a state of emergency in Nyasaland (Malawi) [2]. More Africans had been killed there, this time by police gunfire. In a long letter on how Britain might best respond to such imperial crises there is one particularly arresting sentence. Looking forward to the approaching election, Macleod [3] wrote:

“Black Africa remains perhaps our most difficult problem so far as relationships with the vital middle voters is [sic] concerned. It is the only one in which our policies are under severe criticism and for example the only one on which we are regularly defeated at the universities. *Indeed the universities feel more strongly on this issue than on any other single matter.*” (National Archives/Public Record Office (Kew): PREM.11/2583; emphasis added).

Imagine, British universities then felt more strongly about Africa than about academic salaries or levels of state funding! To have been an Africanist at that time must have been very heaven. The pity of it of course was that there were very few of us, mostly linguists, anthropologists, medical experts, agricultural and veterinary scientists. The *Journal of African History* and *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, brave trumpeters of a seemingly new field of scholarship, started only in 1960, the “year of Africa” that followed. So the strength of university feeling must have reflected a general sense of political obligation to Africa among Britain’s middle classes.

There was also a widespread perception that Africans were now a political force to be reckoned with. They had to be heard, and were. African leaders who jetted into London to negotiate the terms of their independence electrified university audiences. Press cartoons of the time portrayed Africans not as starving children or emaciated victims of disease, but as virile nationalist giants, overshadowing puny British politicians.

The press could also accuse ministers of ruining Britain’s good name in Africa by reason of their cowardice or folly. The same must have been true in France and Belgium – though not in Spain or Portugal, at that time dictatorships not only in Africa but also at home.

This article is adapted from John Lonsdale’s plenary lecture [4] at the Aegis conference on African Studies at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies on 30 June 2005

Africa has changed since then – as has Europe. Fifty years ago European electorates felt they had responsibilities towards Africa. Africans were their colonial subjects. Africans were also

demanding responsibility for themselves. European publics listened. They knew the names of African leaders: Leopold Senghor, Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, Julius Nyerere, Zik (Nnamdi Azikiwe) [5].

One of the leaders of Mediterranean Africa, Gamal Abdel Nasser [6], had in 1956 humiliated both France and Britain in the “Suez” fiasco. Had European publics been more ignorant, Iain Macleod would have been less worried. It was a time of hope for Africa and Africans, perhaps of unrealistic expectations. The world expected Africans to use their energetic new sovereignties to slay the dragons of poverty, ignorance and disease. Some African leaders took up the challenge by adopting the slogan “Freedom and Work”.

And now? Which European minister would warn his leader – Balkenende or Chirac, Schröder or Zapatero, Berlusconi or Blair – that the outcome of the next election might depend on what they did or did not do about Africa? How many Europeans care what Africans think? How much obligation do they feel towards Africans today? Even after the outpouring of publicity, protest, and pop music surrounding the G8 summit [7] in Gleneagles, Scotland, and the accompanying “make poverty history” campaign, the answers may not be comforting.

How far are the professed “friends of Africa” – scholars, students, activists – to blame for the mix of everyday indifference and latent fear, tempered now and again by pity? What can we do to repair our failures in representation? Perhaps it would be to do what best serves our own professional interest: regard African colleagues as allies in a common cause, and repair the failures in African higher education that so diminish the African ability to speak to the rest of the world as intellectual equals, expert witnesses in their own cause, full citizens of our one world.

These questions and answers raise others. How many Europeans today could name any Africans, apart from the bogeyman Robert Mugabe [8] at one extreme and the twin saints at the other, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu? How many less exceptional African leaders attract attention even when, as in summer 2005, the media overflows with African stories? How many Europeans expect Africans to solve their own problems? Do newspapers report how Africans themselves argue about political and social issues, generally with more commitment than European electorates at home?

Why do we need celebrities to enlist our attention? What Bob Geldof and Bono [9] have done is marvellous (the Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen [10] tells me that Geldof proved to be a sharp student of development economics in the telephone tutorials Sen gave at the popstar’s request in 2004). But there are also two dangers in the “celebritisation” of Africa’s needs:

- the sense of guilt that Geldof and Bono arouse in their audiences may prove fleeting and ineffective – when it is important that the G8 and the European Union need to be subjected to intellectually sustained and politically creative scrutiny
- the image of the secular saint flatters the self-regarding, even racist, European image as the heroic dragon-slayer riding to the rescue of a voiceless and helpless African continent, trapped by poverty, ignorance and disease

This, after all, is only the latest chapter in a long history of the mirror-construction of two “racial” identities, European and African. It began at least two centuries ago, during the struggle for the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. The slogan of the Quaker abolitionists, coined in 1787 – just before the French revolution – was “Am I not a man and a brother?” But the African slave into whose mouth this revolutionary question was placed was himself shown, on the Anti-Slavery Society’s seal, down on his knees before his white audience, not on his feet. (Four years later, black slaves were very much on their feet, musket in hand, following Toussaint l’Ouverture in their Haitian rebellion [11].)

So today, popular media constructs Africa as the hopeless, history-less, “other”, the dark antipodes to the purposeful, liberal – above all, *storied* – west. The occasion for the resumption of this image, after the hopeful picture painted by African nationalism, appears to have been the Nigerian civil war of the late 1960s, when the (London) *Sun* called secessionist Biafra [12] *The Land of No Hope*. The self-righteously civilising mission of the past two centuries has thus revived in a post-colonial age.

“Parachute journalists” – so different from the “old Africa hands” like Colin Legum or Basil Davidson, or Richard Dowden [13] more recently – accompany sometimes equally transient aid-givers into what they can understand only as a tribal, lawless, starving Africa, from Somalia and Rwanda in the 1990s to Darfur and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) today.

This populist version of the “civilising mission” infantilises Europeans as well as Africans; it reduces media consumers to voyeurs demanding instant gratification for their immediate feelings – when the real need is to face up to the long, complex, often dispiriting negotiation of critical solidarity with people who demand that their own views be heard.

People specialising in the study of Africa from outside the continent must welcome this task, arduous as it is. But what can we do to help achieve it?

Then and now

This is a task of enlightenment, in most ways harder than it was for our predecessors of fifty and more years ago. Perhaps in one sense only has it become easier, in that pop stars have created an enormous audience for news of Africa, if one that may have little patience with complex academic discussions. We must learn to engage with – even educate – that audience, even if the politicisation of pop is a two-edged sword.

In other ways, the times have moved against “Africanists”. Above all, “freedom fighters” have too often become lords of misrule. The transmutation of Kwame Nkrumah, Hastings Banda, Haile Selassie, or (again) Robert Mugabe tell the melancholy story.

It is difficult to find local heroes today, the equivalent of South Africa’s African National Congress in the 1980s. Africa’s women have the best claim to that title. But in general, Africans and their friends have become disillusioned with the fruits of freedom: stony and pitiless as in the Sudan and Zimbabwe, shrivelled into nothing as in Somalia, or utterly corrupted as in the DRC.

At the same time, many African states would be capable of delivering the public goods of societal renewal – Senegal, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Botswana, South Africa among them – if they were permitted the affordable means to tackle the social cancer of HIV/AIDS.

But there is a deeper problem in addressing the task of enlightenment. In the 1960s, students of Africa were able to *read* the work of African leaders – Julius Nyerere, Frantz Fanon, Tom Mboya, Leopold Senghor – and to learn about Africa in wonderfully cheap books such as the Penguin African Library. The authors were often cosmopolitan journalists with long African experience, such as Patrick Keatley of the (Manchester) *Guardian* (a Canadian), Brian Bunting of the *Rand Daily Mail* and (Johannesburg) *Guardian* (a South African), and Jack Halpern, editor of the *Central African Examiner* (born in Berlin). African novelists also appeared in Heinemann’s equally accessible African Writers Series, launched by Chinua Achebe’s [14] *Things Fall Apart* in 1962.

A lesser-known series that addressed both European and African students was just as significant. Its authors were often white expatriates, deeply involved in the adventure of setting up new African universities. This was Oxford University Press's "Students' Library", whose first title – George Bennett's *Kenya: a Political History* – I bought in 1963 for the equivalent of a few pence today.

Academics were then prepared to write short, simple – but learned – books for a student audience (nor were they burdened by today's severe bureaucratic obligations). The OUP's public-spirited authors included Margery Perham, Bolaji Idowu and Fred Welbourn on African Christianity, Merrick Posnansky on the distant past and Philip Whitaker on the relevance of western political theory to African problems.

Whitaker was on the extra-mural staff of Makerere University College, Uganda – as were his better known contemporaries in Ghana, Thomas Hodgkin, Dennis Austin and David Kimble; this is the sort of teaching service that stands in urgent need of revival today.

The enlightenment such people offered was amazing. They brought African and European audiences into the same historical discourse, with, for instance, comparisons between African and European nationalisms or discussion of classical Greek solutions to contemporary African problems.

What has become of the Penguin African Library, or the Student's Library? Which Africans can interested students now read in cheap editions? Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* is the only recent autobiography that comes to mind. James Currey's African Issues [15] series is the sole source, I believe, of moderately priced but unimpeachably expert discussion on contemporary Africa. Perhaps we should be all the more grateful to Geldof and Bono, the Penguin Specials of today.

It is all the more important that younger Africanists should be aware of the precedent set by our predecessors in bringing Africa and Africans to the attention of a western public. Public academic engagement with African issues has a long and intellectually strenuous history, as a brief (and insular) survey of its achievement and inheritance suggests.

Predecessors in hope

The first modern attempt to educate British voters about African issues – leaving aside university support for the 19th century anti-slavery movement and the early 20th century Congo reform movement – seems to have been in 1929, when the Student Christian Movement produced an eighty-page booklet on *East Africa in Transition*.

This summarised and discussed the 350 pages of a commission of enquiry into the possible "closer union" of the British territories in Eastern Africa, an issue full of racial dynamite in a part of Africa where white settler interests competed with the principles of "native trusteeship" at the heart of British policy. So the precedents go back a long way, even if one ignores them.

A decade later – and nearer to my own theme of the need to listen to Africans as equals – Bronislaw Malinowski [16] presented to a western readership Jomo Kenyatta's work, *Facing Mount Kenya*. As a displaced Pole, conscious of the twin dangers of fascism and communism, Malinowski believed educated Africans experienced the shared "tragedy of the modern world in an especially acute manner."

Malinowski welcomed Kenyatta's views as those of an observant world citizen. The Commission for Africa's 2005 report [17] is entitled *Our Common Interest*. The contrast is stark: self-interest rules in place of universal tragedy; Africa is no longer a prophetic voice but a common concern.

Much more sterling work was accomplished by Africanists' predecessors of more than half a century ago, including the international galaxy of scholars who advised Lord Hailey's *African Survey* (1938). That era of hope for Africa included the renowned figure of Margery Perham, Oxford's University teacher of generations of British colonial cadets. At the intellectual centre of empire, she went to great lengths to include Africans in the circle of a common humanity.

In 1936, Perham edited a collection of biographies, *Ten Africans* [18]. It is extraordinary to read her introduction today, and to recognise how much she is our contemporary. Britons, she remarked, accepted as normal what was in truth "the peculiar condition of empire under which we control the destinies of people we do not understand." The absence of ordinary social relations between the races, "through which people come to know and like each other", was, she thought, to blame for this misunderstanding. She continued:

"The main reason for this is the 'backwardness' of Africans. It is an obvious and fundamental fact, but one upon which we are apt to lean a little too hard in order to make ourselves comfortable in a difficult situation. In default of true knowledge we too often make do with assumptions: the primary one, that Africans are backward; next, that they are almost all equally backward; even that they are inherently, and so permanently, backward. Cut off as most of us are from any contact with Africans as individuals, we think of them or deal with them in the mass..."

Margery Perham carried on the work of introducing individual Africans to the world after 1945. In 1946 she found a publisher for and wrote an introduction to Obafemi Awolowo's [19] book, *The Path to Nigerian Freedom*, when he was but a law student. A decade later she wrote an introduction to the young Tom Mboya's radical pamphlet, *The Kenya Question: An African Answer*, published by the Fabian Colonial Bureau. Ten years later still, she introduced J M Kariuki's shocking memoir of what he had suffered at British hands in *Mau Mau Detainee*.

Here was a senior academic, one of the chief public moralists for imperial trusteeship, actively helping to give young Africans a subversive voice at the seat of empire – and one who could write, privately, that Jomo Kenyatta was the sort of person with whom one could speak without condescension, "man to man".

Scholars at the time had great faith in human agency – perhaps because willpower seemed so self-evidently decisive during and after the ordeal of world war. Margaret Wrong [20], secretary of the international committee for Christian literature for Africa, started her book, *Five Points for Africa* – a plea for a new deal for the continent – with the chapter "We are Men", echoing the question the Quakers had put to the merchants of slavery.

Joyce Cary [21], former colonial official and no friend to African nationalism, was nonetheless passionate in his call for the sort of African freedom that increased personal choice: "To leave any man in ignorance, sickness, poverty, or racial contempt, without help, is to hold freedom cheap."

Melville Herskovits [22], a founder of African studies in the United States, was no less eloquent in the cause of African agency, more cultural than individual in his opinion. To him colonial rulers were wrong to suppose that "Africans were ... highly malleable, a people whose destiny it was to be mo[u]lded into the image their tutors delineated for them." Africans were "a force in being",

no mere “supplementary resource”. Nationalism thus restored to Africans the creativity of power: “Culturally, no less than politically, independence made of them free agents.”

How might we, in our generation, recover a similar sense of purpose and obligation for ourselves and for Europe, in the cause of an African agency that Africa’s recent history, no less than the popular mood of today, seems to deny?

Globalised apartheid?

What we need, I suggest, is an analogy for what got us angry and active in the past.

Would it be too much to compare today’s politically and socially divided but economically unified world with the apartheid South Africa of yesterday? The parallels are surely very close. The rich countries’ immigration and asylum laws operate in ways not greatly different to pass laws. Northern farmers enjoy the same price guarantees and export subsidies that used to protect white settlers from black peasant competitors. The world’s terms of trade, the operations of international oil companies, seem designed to exploit African resources for very little in return other than the arming of African protectors – like the township police of yesteryear. Skilled African workers are recruited to the rich countries’ health services; their “social reproduction” costs are borne by poor African states that reap no benefit from their trained manpower – just as black South African migrant labour was reproduced in the Bantustans, more or less cost-free to its white urban employers.

If that analogy is anywhere near accurate, then might not the precedents of the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), and the campaign against British investment in South Africa, also be useful? Mike Terry, former executive secretary of the AAM, says that “anti-apartheid became part of British student culture and economic boycotts an accepted norm”. AAM also embraced the enthusiasm of the pop music world.

A related point is that African studies stand in great need of economists and economic historians who might understand the real impacts of globalisation on Africa. Three simple thoughts arise, to prompt research into complexity.

First, Africa stands in great need of capital, and the formal relations of production and governance that demand the wider distribution of capital’s profits than to its owners alone. How capital can thus be “socialised” – whether by foreign direct investment or by African state or cooperative ownership – is surely best argued out between Africans.

Second, is it possible that the precipitate rise of Chinese textile and other exports will make African labour globally redundant, and will thirst for oil and markets make China the newest friend [23] to African dictators?

Third, economists will doubtless never agree on how far the fault for Africa’s economic stagnation lies at the door of global structures or the malign local agency of kleptocratic rulers. Existing interpretations of contemporary Africa have paid most heed to changing forms of structural fate. Is it time for a change?

Structure and agency in African studies

Africanist scholarship has not always been the most usefully critical friend of Africa. That judgment may be no more than the prejudice of an historian, whose instinct is for stories of human agency – about who did what to whom, to whose advantage and at whose expense.

Historians, like anthropologists, tend to be particularists, resistant to the grand generalisations beloved of sociologists, political scientists and economists.

With this qualification, the problem in studies of Africa over the last two generations is that Africanists have tended to create three successive, “single” models, teleologies or paradigms of Africa in the public mind. All of these are largely empty of the identifiable, awkward, individual Africans that Margery Perham long ago felt made us, or our analyses, uncomfortable.

The first model, friendly to African nationalism and the new African nations, is the “modernisation” theory that held sway in the 1950s and 1960s. This translated the socially mobile behaviour that was thought to characterise industrial Atlantic society, with its urban anonymity and capitalist rationality (but without its class struggles), to an almost entirely pre-industrial, largely rural, scarcely capitalist Africa.

This liberal political theory was totally disconnected from the parochialisms of African societies; it was also strangely empty of human courage and ingenuity. “Charisma” was an analytical category rather than a personal quality in someone like Nkrumah. Nationalism, far from being a creative adventure, was (as [James S Coleman](#) [24] wrote) a sociological banality, “the inevitable end product of the impact of Western imperialism and modernity on African societies.”

The second model is “underdevelopment”, modernisation’s dark mirror image. This approach had many strands, some more vulgarly Marxist than others. Its partisans could not agree on how far Africa had been exploited by colonial capitalism. Its [proponents](#) [25] tended to argue as if Africa had no hope until the socialist world revolution. But no “underdevelopmentalist” knew how to analyse African social classes and their struggles, a confusion reflected in the common use of the term “petty bourgeoisie”, trendy code for an analytical blind alley.

Without well-defined classes, it was hard to discover heroes of class struggle, people who might mobilise a capacity to change things, however tight the constraints on their agency. A truncated teleology of paralysed dialectics generated few of the African voices which Perham had given us.

The third model is “neo-patrimonialism” – although its scholars disagree on the meaning of the term. In general, it signifies a fatal conjuncture between one of the past glories of African history and its modern nemesis, and leads to an emphasis on the creative resilience of free peasantries in self-governing, stateless, frontier societies.

Today, the argument runs, political elites patronise the same small communities – “tribes” – in order to press their private demands on the state’s public goods. Clientilism, bound by personal codes of honour, [cannot build states](#) [26] that obey a rule of law and, without law, states can expect neither investment nor any wide political legitimacy.

Yet even in such “neo-patrimonial” analyses of what are quintessentially face-to-face politics, it is rare to meet fully rounded political actors. Indeed, there is a curiously mechanical quality to our analyses of the intricately personal politics of neo-patrimonialism. The logic is too inexorable, inviting two objections: it invites acceptance of what is at best questionable, that international non-governmental agencies can resolve problems of governance when it often appears that they absolve African governments of the necessity to tackle them; and that not all African states have followed the same downward path to its inevitable end.

All three analyses of modern Africa have shared a basic weakness: lack of historical depth. Without this it is difficult to see how African states have developed differently from one another over the last half century. But there are indeed many diverse social, political and nationalist

histories within Africa, emerging within different sorts of colony, shaping different purposes for independence, and permitting different ways of responding to post-colonial crises.

What the three models miss is the exercise of agency by political leaders, or their failure to act. The social sciences seem structurally averse to recognising such contingency. An understanding of the variety of modern African history rests on a balance between structure and agency.

The recovery of African voices

What is to be done? If the globalisation of apartheid gets anywhere near the truth, then global justice must be the goal for the west's political leaders – as I think it was for Iain Macleod, prompted by the fear of what Africans might do were justice denied.

But there are obstacles in the path of such distributive justice: the protections demanded by producers in the industrialised world; the security priorities of “the war on terror”; popular objections to the immigration of today's huddled masses; the curse of oil and strategic minerals; the age of Chinese mass production that may turn Africans anew into “surplus people”. Europeans no longer fear African protest – unless they happen to be Muslim. Conversely, there are few African heroes, allies in development, not least because African states lack so many of the competitive institutional authorities that can, on occasion, call rulers to account.

The G8 has proposed its compromise solutions. But what can mere academics do to see that even compromises are honoured? Our only power is to educate imaginations. But that – both in what we write and in what we advocate – is potentially enormous.

The most powerful goad to action on behalf of justice is surely a universal imagination that Africans are also men and women like us, with the will, however constrained by past history, to change their societies for the better. What Africans perhaps most need from our research are the biographies that give voice to their reflective, polemical, thoughts.

Alexander McCall Smith may have done more for Africa than all the rest of us, with his creation of Mma Precious Ramotswe of Botswana's No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency. Certainly, more people will read McCall Smith than, say, JDY Peel's account of how Yoruba Christians have acted with a consciousness of history as acute as any European's, or John Iliffe's panorama of how a sense of honour has stiffened African agency throughout history, perhaps more so than is prudent for the conduct of modern states. The historical perspective that makes biography worth writing, one that concedes some causal weight to a willed sense of purpose, is beginning to colour our analyses at last.

But Africans need our advocacy as well as our learning; without passionate commitment there can be no dispassionate research. The best way to combine such passion with its opposite, professional disinterest, is for European Africanists to concentrate our public energies on demanding that our governments support the properly funded, properly protected, rebirth of African universities – a matter to which the Commission for Africa paid some, but too little, attention.

There would be many benefits of such an initiative; I will suggest five:

- the renewed ability of African scholars, as in the 1960s and 1970s, to challenge the monopoly on what passes for useful Africanist knowledge now held by westerners; our colleagues would again be our competitors, and western leaders too would once again hear African voices to which they would have to pay heed

- restored African universities would find the energy to rethink Africa's development needs, and allow higher education to find a new direction, better adapted to a knowledge-based world economy; at the centre of such academic globalisation must surely be the Atlantic African diaspora of academics and other professionals
- African universities' access to moral and political philosophers as well as science and technology would be a way for Africans to create a revolution in public morality; a distant, difficult but essential aspiration to offer public thinkers in these institutions
- African universities would be enabled to think through problems of social reform and economic competition in the context of the global economy
- African universities would be helped to revivify public spheres of political discourse, against the will of rulers unaccustomed to any competing authority; productive effort needs confidence in the future that only politics can provide; and rational bureaucratic politics, held to account by democratic institutions of collective opinion, is the least worst option.

The critical public voices I envisage will need to be protected, to be properly paid, with international standards of information and research infrastructures. This is a tall order. But what is the alternative? African states must be encouraged to submit to the self-disciplines undertaken by the few that have avoided the depths of "clientelist crisis". Most are already subject to many external conditionalities, each a derogation from sovereignty. Another conditionality is as likely as any other to help Africans get off their knees and on to their feet. Is there a not a case for insisting on an "Academic Rights Watch" conducted by some international body, of which the Association of African Universities would be a foundational element? Might that not be a condition for all educational aid? Is this the one simple point that academics might fasten on when considering a goal for our political activism?

Finally, how might we as Africanists equip ourselves for such public advocacy? In our own national academies we are weak, as disregarded as church mice. Our individual national research assets in Africa are puny. But we could turn such separate weaknesses into the beginnings of a collective strength, by forming an "ever closer union" of research activities on Africa

We could also resurrect something like the Oxford University Press's Student's Library. The first title might even be a summary, eighty-page, discussion of the 460 pages of the Commission for Africa (priced at two euros or less)?

How many of us still alive thirty years hence will be able to echo what Basil Davidson said to me in 1998, looking back on his activist journalism of the 1960s: "The names come faltering back, and the dramas associated with them and I am repeatedly made grateful to have lived through those tremendous years"? The responsibility for a new partnership with Africa and Africans is ours.

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