

CRITICAL AFRICAN STUDIES: A VOLUNTARIST MANIFESTO

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Launching a new academic publication is something that always requires some justification, especially when the output in question has a somewhat unconventional format. The question that is likely to be asked is whether there is genuinely a niche that is not already being filled. African studies may sometimes seem like a crowded field, but the thinking that lies behind the launch of *Critical African Studies* is that the manner in which academic research and publishing on Africa have evolved has yielded a landscape which, while very interesting in parts, is also somewhat predictable. Since the demise of the *Southern African Review of Books* (1987-1996),¹ which always had a more limited regional remit, there has been a need for outlets in which Africanists can dwell on the importance of particular contributions as well as the state of the field in general. While a forum such as *Critical African Studies* cannot hope to reinvigorate African studies single-handedly, it can widen the space available for critical reflection on what we all do.

Grumpy African studies

The reasons why African studies has assumed its present morphology have to do with the interplay between various academic logics - including the ways in which research is rewarded and funded, and imbalances between so-called 'northern' institutions and their African counterparts - as well as the economics of publishing. I will argue here that while this is actually an opportune moment for the flourishing of African studies as a field, current structures do not encourage lively debate or exploratory thought as much as they could. Those of us who belong to a cohort that

¹ The recovered digitized version may now be found at http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.uni-ulm.de/~rturrell/

became seduced by African studies in the late 1970s and 1980s often miss the sense that there is something worth debating and that debate itself matters.

There have been a number of pointed criticisms of recent trends in African studies - including the tendency towards highlighting the exotic and presenting Africa as a negation of western normality (Mbembe, 2001: 1-23) - but these identify only one aspect of a more pervasive problem. A more mundane criticism would be that much of what is published feels very similar, is empirically thinner than comparable research from an earlier era and tends to shy away from tackling big questions. New habits have grown up around the structures that shape the academic game, which in Britain has meant the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), and in the United States (US) comes down to tenure and promotions. The rewards regime helps to explain why many books are published which might not otherwise have seen the light of day - which relates to my first point above - but it does not really account for the second or for the third facets, for reasons I will return to in the final section. The shortcomings are more a function of how research communities are built and communicate with one another. The oft-bemoaned reality that Africanist research has become marginalized within the core disciplines - even to some extent in social anthropology - is arguably not such a bad thing if the disciplines themselves have gone down avenues that are of marginal interest to people studying Africa. But if Africanists cannot generate their own lines of enquiry that animate debate and open up new frontiers of cutting-edge research, or find common ground with researchers working on other parts of the so-called developing world, then there is a problem that we should be concerned about. Of course, Africanists also need to engage with the disciplines in which they are partially embedded, creating not merely data but generating insights and framing problematics that can feed into wider intellectual enquiry.²

Fortunately, the technologies that are presently at one's disposal allow one to try out alternative formats in the effort to render academic enquiry more intellectually stimulating. There have been some useful initiatives in recent times, of which the reviews on H-Net and *Reviews in History*, are two (non-Africa specific)³ examples. These publish straightforward book reviews

² The African Borderlands Research Network (ABORNE) is one initiative that aims to insert Africa back into the supposed mainstream, although borderland studies is by its nature interdisciplinary.

<http://www.esf.org/activities/research-networking-programmes/social-sciences-scscs/current-esf-research-networking-programmes/african-borderlands-research-network-aborne.html>

³ *Reviews in History* is published by the Institute of Historical Research in London.

online and through circulation lists, but the pieces are substantially longer than normal - and in the latter case the authors under review receive a right to reply. In the African studies arena, the *Africa Past and Present* podcasts that have been initiated by Michigan State University reveal the potentialities of a different format, although whether bandwidth is a constraint for African participants is an open question.⁴ The H-Africa discussion list, and its sub-regional variants, is more of a mixed bag. It serves a useful function for those fishing for information (and who are often too lazy to find it through the conventional routes), but whether it has promoted meaningful debate is questionable. Possibly because of the conventions that have grown up around discussion lists in general, in which carefully considered contributions are not required, the level of debate has sometimes been embarrassingly poor and often faintly depressing.⁵ H-Africa has revealed its limitations as a forum for really advancing the level of academic enquiry, as important as it has been for keeping academics in touch.

The Centre of African Studies (CAS) at the University of Edinburgh has published more than a hundred occasional papers since the 1960s. This is a format that has served us well over the decades, but it has reached the end of its shelf life. In moving to a fully refereed online publication we hope to do our bit to provoke a more challenging kind of academic debate about what African studies is and could be - unconstrained by the strictures normally attached to conventional journal publishing. In what follows, I intend to make the case at greater length, but a health warning is perhaps worth registering at this point: the bugbears are entirely my own and many of the examples reflect some of my own obsessions and irritations. I do, however, believe that the story is broadly the same in the areas that I am less qualified to comment upon.

Accentuate the Positive

The argument I wish to advance here is *not* that African studies is moribund. In the 1980s and early 1990s, there were many gloomy assessments in Britain about whether African studies would

See <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/>

⁴ The MSU podcasts may be found at <http://afripod.aodl.org/>

⁵ An early marker was laid down in 1995 by the H-Africa exchange concerning the role of Gorée in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Philip Curtin made the mistake of questioning the significance of Gorée, for which he was accused of the equivalent of Holocaust denial. The entirely logical reasons he advanced for why the island could not have been a major exit point for slaves was conveniently forgotten by many of his critics who could not resist hitting the 'Send' button. On the whole, the academic debate around aspects of the slave trade has been extremely productive, but this has taken place in other fora.

be able to reproduce as the first generation of scholars retired and as universities developed other priorities (Robertson 1985; Twaddle 1986; Hodder-Williams 1986; McCracken 1993; Lonsdale 2000; Bundy 2002; Nugent 2007). The closure of the Centre of Southern African Studies in York, and the death of the African studies group in Aberdeen, were depressing signs of the times. In the new millennium, however, the study of Africa in the United Kingdom has positively flourished, with existing centres - including Edinburgh and Birmingham - either maintaining their staffing levels or expanding, and the number of research students increasing exponentially. Many universities that had not previously sustained Africanist positions - such as Durham, Exeter, Sheffield and Warwick - have made an investment in recent times, while Oxford has finally created a centre of its own after decades of failing to take the plunge. Cambridge looks set to flesh out its existing centre, while the London system has very significant concentrations of excellence that extend well beyond the portals of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).

Across the rest of Europe, African studies is thriving as never before. While France, the Netherlands and the Nordic countries retain their notable strengths, there has been an impressive expansion of research and teaching on Africa in Germany, Portugal and Italy. German institutions like Bayreuth and Leipzig are rolling out very substantial doctoral programmes, with significant funding attached, which is bound to produce new clusters of research excellence. Germany, and even more so Italy, has a recurrent problem of providing gainful employment for those who pass through the system, but in both cases fresh talent has been snapped up elsewhere, especially in Britain, and the net overall effect can only be positive. The AEGIS African studies network can now count on member centres in almost every country of the European Union (24 members in total), and new applicants are continually applying to join. Moreover, within many European countries there are vibrant country-specific associations, which would include the African Studies Association of the UK (ASAUK) and a revitalized Royal African Society (RAS) in Britain. Although the United States has entered a bit of a trough, it continues to boast the largest collection of Africanists anywhere. One of the strengths of the American scene is that researchers have not confined themselves to Anglophone Africa, but have made seminal contributions in Francophone and Lusophone Africa. The same is true, on a smaller scale, of Canada.

In Africa, the long and seemingly inexorable decline of academic institutions, compounded by the sudden shocks of restructuring in the 1980/90s, stripped many universities of their capacity to conduct meaningful research. But some institutions, such as the University of Ghana, have

witnessed the revival of a research culture that bodes well for the future. In South Africa, there are a number of universities that are performing extremely well. Although these tend to be the historically white universities - like Stellenbosch, Witwatersrand, Cape Town and the University of Johannesburg - their intake has been transformed, not least by the recruitment of staff and research students from well north of the Limpopo. Moreover, many of the think-tanks that have sprung up since the 1990s, which are often portrayed as delivering a rather 'quick and dirty' product in return for donor money, have performed first-rate research. One thinks of the Institute for Strategic Studies (ISS), based in Pretoria but with a growing number of regional offices, or the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Accra. At a continental level, CODESRIA has performed a crucial role in linking up researchers across the continent - transcending regional and language barriers in the process. The same is to some extent true of regionally-based research organizations such as OSSREA. No doubt, there is much to be done in tightening up these various networks, and linking African and European researchers, but much of the infrastructure is already in place.

A further positive indicator is that more than ever before, Africanists can draw on a common language to talk to each other across disciplinary boundaries. On this point, I need to embark on a historical digression. In the founding years of African studies in Britain, the importance of fostering interdisciplinarity was certainly regarded as something desirable. In Edinburgh, following the Hayter report on area studies, CAS was constituted as an interdisciplinary centre. The latter eventually assumed the format of one historian, one geographer, one social anthropologist and one political scientist, each of whom retained a foot in a core discipline, but was expected to engage with the others in the spirit of a collective enterprise. The same model applied in Birmingham, but with the distinct advantage that all the staff (at that time) worked on West Africa. But in the 1960s, the ideal of a creative fusion was unevenly realized. There was some overlap between the interests of historians and political scientists, most notably with respect to the study of nationalist movements and the politics of ethnicity.⁶ But social anthropology remained highly protective of its disciplinary boundaries, and many of its internal debates did not find common ground with what researchers in other disciplines were doing. In the 1970s, this remained the case to some extent, whereas the vogue for radical political economy

⁶ A classic text, which revealed a strong interest in history, was Sklar (1963).

created fertile fields of interaction between politics, sociology, development studies and geography. This was a period when some lively debates were conducted through the pages of journals such as the *Review of African Political Economy*. In the much-discussed Kenya and Tanzania exchanges, some fundamental issues were discussed at length - such as the extent to which post-colonial states was capable of acting as an agent of progressive change, or whether Africa had ruling classes that had an interest in generating self-sustaining development.⁷ The literature on African peasantries was particularly rich, but the concern with urban stratification also produced some excellent work. Many of these studies of urban labour were historical, such as Charles Van Onselen's classic *Chibaro* (1976), whereas others were more contemporary in focus (Jeffries 1978; Lubeck 1986).

These were the decades when field research was a highly valued *rite de passage*. Many of the studies from the late 1960s and 1970s still stand out for the impressive depth and quality of the data gathered during long stints in the field. Another important point to note is that much of this research emanated from within African institutions. Although Makerere was an early casualty of economic decline and political interference, excellent research continued to be produced at institutions like the Ahmadu Bello University (Zaria), the University of Dar es Salaam and the University of Dakar. Many foreigners who went on to make their careers outside of Africa spent extended periods in such universities, were profoundly shaped by those experiences and maintained active links with their former academic homes in the years thereafter.

In the mid-1980s, as the economic crisis worsened, two important things happened. Firstly, most African universities were savaged by swingeing budget cuts, which were both intended and a side effect of economic adjustment. The erosion of real salaries made it virtually impossible for academics in many countries to continue conducting sustained periods of field research. Secondly, there was a backlash against the dependency paradigm that happened to coincide with the post-modern turn within the humanities and social sciences more generally. Although the latter fashion gripped North America and Europe, it passed most of Africa by with the exception of particular universities in South Africa - thereby creating a significant fissure in the terrain on which academic debate took place. This is especially apparent with respect to historical writing on a country like Nigeria. While historians based in Nigeria tended to write regional and local histories,

⁷ For a retrospective on the Kenya debate, see Leys (1996) chs. 6-7. I have drawn on the material in my synopsis of the experience of African capitalism and African socialism, in Nugent (2004), ch.5.

that met a demand and were often published within in-house journals and by local presses, this approach - which drew on a venerable tradition associated with the University of Ibadan - came to be regarded as *passé* in the west.

In academic departments at specific American universities, the prospects of being taken seriously by one's colleagues, and hence of being promoted, hinged on whether one could play the game. Writing about representations, whether these were of race or gender, became fashionable, but in a way that was oddly out of kilter with what were regarded as significant representations within Africa. The obsession with representations, to the exclusion of the attempt to grapple with reality, was most pronounced in social anthropology, although it was increasingly evident in historical writing as well.⁸ This was ironic, given that the reputation of the discipline was based on the image of the intrepid anthropologist who spent many years getting to grips with the language and culture of the society (s)he was seeking to understand. But that was precisely the problem - or so it was argued. The contention that bounded cultures did not really exist was a serious one, but it sometimes provided the basis of a logical fallacy: after all, why should taking a locality as one's focus presume that it was hermetically sealed? Indeed, this kind of research could become the basis for proving quite the opposite point (Piot 1999). But the retreat into representations also had other causes. As anthropologists became more conscious of how the work of the founding fathers was itself rooted in unequal power relations, they began to fret about the effects of their own interventions. Hence writing about the act of researching Africa (or any other society) became a substitute for actually 'doing' it, on the questionable premise that this escaped the problem of producing yet more representations that constructed Africa and Africans as the object of the western gaze. In the process, of course, anthropologists risked marginalizing themselves. This inevitably produced its own consequences further down the line. As social anthropologists struggled to defend the relevance of their discipline, it became necessary and politic to engage with the 'real world'. Especially in Britain, many anthropologists became glorified development consultants living off Department for International Development (DFID) consultancies. While those who went down this route could now argue that what they did was both practical and relevant, this barely concealed the reality that their expertise on the countries and the localities they were being asked to work on was as thin as that of other consultants. Whether there will be a

⁸ I am grateful to Joost Fontein for prompting me to comment on this aspect, but the critique is my own.

backlash against these trends, and a return to the valorization of grounded fieldwork, remains to be seen. I have dwelt on social anthropology not in order to cast aspersions on the discipline - in fact, quite the opposite - but in order to make a point about how research communities became disconnected from one another and, in extreme cases, from the societies they were seeking to understand in the 1980s and 1990s. This was an exaggerated case of similar trends elsewhere.

As political economy itself went out of fashion in the 1980s, many of the areas of former strength - such as the study of peasantries - withered on the vine. Equally detrimental was the turning away from the study of state institutions by researchers of African politics. It became commonplace to write of the state as something that was somehow dysfunctional (or 'soft' to use one singularly unhelpful metaphor), but few researchers continued to grapple with the fabric of institutions and how they were reproduced through time and space. The decline in sustained research on militaries and bureaucracies is a legacy that African political science now has to grapple with.⁹ Finally, the demise of the master narrative of dependency contributed to a fragmentation of African studies into more or less discrete sub-fields that did not connect with one another as readily as in the past. A new narrative of globalization re-connected some of these components - providing a focus for those writing about migration or Africa's place in the new international economy - but it was far too diffuse to provide a focal point for African studies as a whole. In the wrong hands, it could be made to explain everything - and nothing.

At about the same time, South Asianists were embracing the subaltern studies agenda which might be thought of as squaring the intellectual circle; namely by combining a new concern with discourses of power and an older nationalist problematic.¹⁰ But subaltern studies was such a success because it found an institutional base in South Asian universities. By contrast, African studies, which had pioneered similar histories from below in the 1960s - which were similarly written from within African institutions - found itself rather stranded by changing academic fashions abroad and the decay of universities at home. Although Terence Ranger (1990; 1992) maintained that Africanists could learn from the subaltern studies approach, almost nobody took

⁹ There is nothing comparable, for example, to Luckham's detailed study of the Nigerian military (1971). Symptomatically, institutions are almost completely absent from a book such as Bayart's, *The State in Africa* (1993). One can buy the argument that culture matters (Chabal and Daloz 2005), and affects how institutions operate, but this is no substitute for examining those institutions at close quarters. For an example of how this can be done, see Chalfin (2008). Some of the most interesting work, like that of Chalfin, is being done by anthropologists rather than political scientists.

¹⁰ There is a vast literature here, which it is not possible to cite. Some of the earlier contributions were re-published as Guha and Spivak (1988).

up the offer. Francophone African scholars raised some important questions about how one might understand politics from below (Bayart, Mbembe & Toulabor 1992). This came from a standpoint that was less historical than subaltern studies, but bore some affinities with it. However, the insights were never really taken up in the Anglophone academic world, and there was a limited follow-through by the protagonists themselves (but see Ndjio 2005). What ultimately emerged, therefore, were bifurcated academic communities in which African studies in the ‘north’ (Anglophone and Francophone) and in Africa increasingly spoke different academic languages. Because the research funds were located in ‘northern’ institutions, this was as divisive as it was dysfunctional.

In the 1990s, some of the youngest African talent migrated to the US, and to a lesser extent to Europe, to ply its academic trade - underlining the realities of global migration. Whether this is for good or for ill is a moot point. Clearly, it has stripped African universities of some of its finest minds, but then the latter have not been sacrificed to impossible volumes of teaching and administration. Those who have left for foreign institutions, and who remain productive researchers, are well aware of how their intellectual ambitions might have been stifled if they had remained at home. Albeit from afar, some of the intellectual *émigrés* have mentored the next cohort pushing through, and the possibility of an eventual return is not ruled out.

During the same period, as I have already indicated, African studies has staged an unexpected recovery. The resurgence has been facilitated by a softening of the boundaries between the core disciplines. A stereotype of the interface between history and social anthropology used to be that the latter was trapped in an ethnographic present whereas the former was entranced by the colonial archive and paid insufficient attention to the actual dynamic of African societies. If this was ever a fair representation of reality, it is certainly misleading today. Anthropologists have become interested in the history of their own discipline, which has entailed looking at how its practitioners engaged with African realities in the colonial and early independence periods. Hence the questions that many anthropologists are asking assume an interconnectedness between past and present.¹¹ An excellent case in point would be the attempt to understand how memories of the slave trade continue to be encoded in the practices of West African peoples (Shaw, 2002; Rosenthal, 1998). If anthropologists are these days to be found

¹¹ I am, of course, referring to those who are interested in something more than representations.

immersed in the archives, one is just as likely to find historians engaged in grounded fieldwork. As some of their interests have converged - for example, with respect to environment, landscape and memory - it has been very easy for researchers to find grounds for academic collaboration. It is to be celebrated that the agendas of social historians and social anthropologists are closer than at any other time in the past. Equally, students of African politics have increasingly tended to look for socio-cultural explanations for political behaviour (Chabal & Daloz 1998). This is true whether the focus is on political elites or on alienated youth who became such an important factor in guerrilla insurgencies in the early 1990s (Abbink & Van Kessel 2005; Honwana and De Boeck 2005).¹² Meanwhile, anthropologists are contributing to our understanding of politics by showing how networks actually function (Bierschenk & De Sardan 2003). Equally, there has been a convergence between the concerns of economists and the rest of the social sciences, as manifested in work on the economic causes and consequences of conflict (Collier & Hoeffler 2000; Collier & Sambanis 2005) and research on informal economies (Clark 1988; Igue & Soulé 1992; Hansen 2000). All this means that there is greater scope than ever for Africanists to roam across the disciplines in a manner that can actually be very productive - provided of course sufficient attention is paid to fundamental questions about comparative methodology, the production of empirical knowledge and the integral role of theory. In the absence of such interrogation, academic enquiry risks becoming something like an Easter egg hunt: challenging and tasty up to a point, but not greatly revealing of deeper truths.

Upstream and Downstream

So far so positive. In this final section, I want to return to some of the limitations of the present dispensation and to suggest ways in which a new journal such as *Critical African Studies* can make a useful contribution.

The reasons why African studies arguably does not play sufficiently to its strengths are only partly attributable to funding strictures. In Britain, there is more money for the pursuit of research in the social sciences than at any moment in the past. Although some of it is tied to themes that the funding councils identify, applicants to the Economic and Social Research Council

¹² In the substantial literature on the war in Sierra Leone, it is difficult to discern a very clear division between the perspectives of political scientists and social anthropologists.

(ESRC), the Leverhulme Trust, the Nuffield Foundation and the Wellcome Trust are also free to propose their own projects. Additional funding is available through DFID, although this is commissioned research and has to conform to what the agency would prefer to hear. On the whole, though, it would be inaccurate to suggest that researchers working on contemporary Africa are hemmed in by funding criteria. Those who work in the humanities have more cause for complaint because the money that is available through the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) is more meagre, and has contracted further due to recent financial constraints. But far more funding is available through the AHRC, the British Academy and some of the trusts than was true of the period before the 1990s. The greatest structural constraint lies in funding collaborative research between European and African scholars. The money that is presently available tends to be tied, for example through DFID consortia, whereas there is much less available for independent research initiatives. At a continental level, there are resources to promote inter-European research collaboration, but producing symmetrical research agendas with African colleagues remains a challenge.

The RAE regime in Britain has had an important influence over the way research is conceived and executed, although this does not affect Africanists more than scholars working in other areas. Because the RAE cycle was relatively short, the strategic choice of many researchers was to frame standalone projects that could be turned into publications relatively quickly rather than working up projects that might take years to bring to fruition.¹³ This may also help to explain why fieldwork tends to be more attenuated. The tendency to plan for quick returns can be seen in recent submissions to *African Affairs*, the *Journal of Modern African Studies* and the *African Studies Review* in which discrete events and issues, such as elections or anniversaries, have become more common.¹⁴ Detailed studies of, for example, centre-local relations that used to routinely grace the pages of these journals, have become less common - one suspects because they require longer periods of field research. Those finely grained studies that do make it into print tend to be the products of doctoral research where vestiges of an older research tradition remain. The eternal quest for job security plays a part in many countries. In the US, the tenure process in the top-ranked universities is unforgiving, making it imperative to produce a monograph and a

¹³ This is not to deny, of course, that many researchers have been able to construct research teams around larger funding applications.

¹⁴ I include myself here, having written a number of articles on Ghanaian elections. My research on West African borderlands has had a longer gestation period.

handful of articles within a few years of employment. This usually involves turning a thesis into publications, in a manner that does not leave much time for reflection. In many European countries, researchers shuttle from one group research project to the next, whereas permanent professorships are few and far between. In these cases, the realities of collaborative research tend to impose greater quality controls, although much depends on the duration of the project funding. The bottom line here is that the overall university environment does tend to work against the kind of sustained engagement with an area of study that produced classic research which, in days gone by, has been able to stand the test of time.

Let us be honest. Most modern academics are caught on a treadmill that prevents them from thinking in a sustained way about what they are doing. Typically, a researcher presents a paper at a conference at which (s)he is given all of ten minutes to outline the findings. A cursory discussion then follows, and minds then turn to converting the paper into a publication before it is overtaken by other commitments. By their very nature, conference papers are often half-cooked, but the pressure to produce finished results means that while they might receive some light seasoning, they are often sent off with minimal changes. One reason why publishers tend to be reluctant to take on conference volumes is that they receive so many manuscripts that are a collection of such offerings. Although many 'top' journals pride themselves on their rejection rates, the statistical chances of placing an article in a journal are usually pretty good. Journals that are supposedly ranked highly receive too many submissions, whereas those that are ranked lower may find that they are regarded as an outlet of last resort. In an ideal world, publications find their appropriate level. Quality is, of course, a subjective matter and respectable journals often publish articles that are not as original as those that are rejected or find their way into 'lesser journals'. In fact, many in-house journals in Europe do publish high-quality research, especially in languages other than English. Although there has actually been an expansion in the number of Africanist journals, especially with the recent push by Taylor & Francis, it is questionable whether these are actually helping to boost quality. The picture in the world of books looks both the same and different. There has always been a hierarchy of academic publishing, with a handful of elite presses at the top, a respectable middle and a cluster at the bottom where less attention is paid to quality controls and where an author subsidy may be required (although the books are usually no cheaper). In the US, there has been a contraction of Africanist publishing, with mainstream presses tending to solicit textbooks rather than research monographs. Even the university presses are

scaling back. In Europe, Brill has expanded its list significantly, to the relief of many academics, but the total number of outlets is smaller than it was ten years ago. What impact this will have in the medium-term remains to be seen.

There are some aspects of the publishing regime that contribute to the relative dearth of exciting new research. One is that journals do not really provide much of a forum for debate. Reviews and review articles may provide a critique, but it is uncommon for authors to receive a right of reply. Moreover, reviews often emerge years after the books in question have come out, by which time they may even be out of print! Special issues tend to be more conducive to debate, but relatively few Africanist journals favour that format on a regular basis. *Africa*, the *Journal of Southern African Studies* and *Politique Africaine* are honourable exceptions.

The existing configuration of publishing tends to produce upstream and downstream blockages. The downstream blockages arise from the steady flow of publications that may add to our empirical knowledge, but without necessarily promoting greater overall clarity. The reason why debates are so important is that they force contributors to draw general conclusions from their data.¹⁵ If properly structured, they can help audiences to assess which interpretations are the more plausible. However, debates are also productive in the sense that they may re-orientate the original discussion when it has reached the point of diminishing returns - hence removing the blockage - and they may stimulate fertile new lines of enquiry. Some debates have been successfully pursued through the pages of journals, and some have even been successfully prosecuted through the super-tankers of academic publication, namely the scholarly monograph.¹⁶ But because the turnaround times in journals and monographs are so slow, there are inherent barriers to intellectual exchange that are not present in online publications. The debate about ethnicity in Africa took about 25 years to work itself out - finally yielding a broad consensus - in part because opportunities to crystallize the issues in contention were few and far between (Nugent 2008). The latter is an excellent example of where a publication such as *Critical African Studies* could have performed a useful function by clarifying the parameters of the debate.

¹⁵ This also relates to my earlier observation about Africa being a source of data rather than ideas that can contribute to disciplinary advances.

¹⁶ The debate about the relationship between guerrillas and peasants in Zimbabwe is perhaps the best example of a productive debate being pursued through the monograph. See Lan (1985); Ranger (1985); Kriger (1992); Maxwell (1999); and Alexander, McGregor & Ranger (2000).

The upstream blockages relate to the conditions of knowledge production about Africa. One of the problems that Africanists face is that there is a proliferation of information that is often difficult to make coherent sense of. In the case of a social reality like HIV/AIDS, it was always more or less clear what the main contours of the research would be. But it is frequently the case that phenomena emerge that appear to be extremely important at the time, but without anyone really knowing what the salient questions should be. A case in point is China's re-engagement with Africa. Just about everyone recognizes the importance of this development, but in the welter of conferences, edited books and monographs, researchers have found themselves repeating the same broad lines of enquiry.¹⁷ If ever there was a topic in search of an agenda this is it. The need for a focus has a bearing on what happens downstream where particular debates - such as whether China is an obstruction to 'good governance' - are at best incipient. By encouraging researchers to reflect on why they think China-Africa relations might be important, a forum such as *Critical African Studies* can help to shape more productive research agendas. The new urbanization is another case where scholars have yet to catch up with the unfolding realities.¹⁸

The flip side is that editorial policy should also identify neglected themes of research and provide them with the oxygen they need to thrive. Arguably, we know a great deal about some issues and next to nothing about others. Hence we know a lot about the plight of African migrants in Europe - in part because of the interest of EU states in funding this kind of research with a view to tightening the barriers to entry - but we know relatively little about border crossings within Africa. The fascination with Pentecostalism, and its role in legitimating accumulation, is perfectly understandable, but many other lines of questioning about religious practice have been squeezed in the process. The list of strangely neglected topics is potentially a very long one. One subject that is only now beginning to attract attention is taxation (Lieberman 2003; Redding 2006; Fjeldstad & Therkildsen 2008; Fjeldstad & Moore 2009); another is the only other certainty in life, namely death.¹⁹ There is much more that could be done on the subject of honour, not least in relationship to questions of youth and self-representation (Iliffe 2005). Others topics that are

¹⁷ There has been a veritable explosion of new publications. Recent additions include Alden (2007); Rotberg (2008); and Taylor (2008). The best edited collection is Alden, Large and Soares de Oliveira (2008).

¹⁸ What is clear from recent publications on the African city is that scholars are only beginning to think through the consequences of hyper-urbanization. For the most recent contributions see Simone (2004); Potts and Bryceson (2006); and Locatelli & Nugent (2009).

¹⁹ There is currently an AHRC-funded project on the history of death in Africa led by Rebekah Lee and Megan Vaughan that promises to open up an exciting new area of enquiry. See <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/deathinafrica/>

relatively untouched are childhood and benevolence. Whereas the important issue of transport is receiving some attention, aviation and its relationship to nationalism is a topic crying out for research.²⁰ The challenge is to highlight the innovative work of the often lonely researcher breaking new ground. Drawing attention to innovative framings of research upstream, of course, complements the task of pushing forward new lines of enquiry further downstream.

The weight of academic publishing will always lie with the standard journals and the monographs, but by filling in the missing middle it is possible to help generate more original and reflective research that should help to channel high-quality work towards these outlets. I have labelled this a voluntarist enterprise because it is based on the idea that a proliferation of alternative academic formats (including podcasts) is what is needed to escape the comfortable inertia that Africanist academia has settled into. *Critical African Studies* is about trying to revive a sense that debate should be an integral part of all research activity. This is a debate that should be stimulating and informed, and it should transcend academic egos. The H-Africa experience suggests that it is important that the rules of debate be properly laid down and policed.

Coming Soon to a Screen Near You

We have chosen to launch *Critical African Studies* with what is in effect a re-visitation of an older debate about Bushmen. Ed Wilmsen, who has been a key protagonist in the Kalahari debate, provides a pointed critique of representations of Bushmen, placing these within the historical conjuncture of the Cold War and the possibility of nuclear annihilation. Although he is often highly critical of writing about Bushmen, he does not exclude himself from the critique and he accepts that some of what he says has been prefigured by other authors. Although the contributors who have responded to Wilmsen's piece have done so pointedly, especially in their own defence, what emerges from this lively exchange are thought-provoking reflections about how knowledge about Africa is produced and reproduced over time. In reading Wilmsen's article and some of the responses, the question of who is representing who emerges as key, suggesting that some of the obvious asymmetries in power relations may conceal more complex dynamics. Evidently, this is an insight that can be applied to other contexts as well, which is why we have chosen this debate

²⁰ There is currently a project on the internal combustion engine being conducted by Jan-Bart Gewald at Leiden.

to launch our publication. It is also worth underlining, in view of my earlier critique, that this discussion of representations does not preclude grounded research. Indeed it actually invites a closer engagement with the shifting realities in the field, given that 'the Bushmen' - one could equally well invoke the Swahili or the FulBe - are both a differentiated and a moving target.

In future issues of *Critical African Studies*, we will turn to other topics that we hope will stimulate a response. It is anticipated that the next issue will involve a discussion of Patrick Chabal's latest book (2009), *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*, in which the issue of how politics is conceived of by ordinary Africans will be aired. We are also anticipating a contribution by Terence Ranger on history and fiction. Needless to say, we thank our present and future contributors for their efforts, and welcome suggestions for future debates. We also thank our colleagues who have agreed to be on the Advisory Board for bringing their expertise and experience to bear on behalf of *Critical African Studies*. Let the discussion commence!

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