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Africa's Pasts and Africa's Historians

Frederick Cooper

There are many ways of approaching the past. What is called "history" in European, American, or African universities is only one of them. As V.Y. Mudimbe and Bogumil Jewsiewicki observe, "Africans tell, sing, produce (through dance, recitation, marionette puppets), sculpt, and paint their history" (1993, 3). One should not make the division between academic history and other varieties too sharp: the mission graduates of the 1920s or 1930s who wrote down "their" oral traditions were simultaneously mediating between genres, acting within local idioms that phrased political arguments in terms of collective memory, and redefining the source material for academic history. And scholars from Blyden to Cheikh Anta Diop were engaging western philosophical discourse, taking it seriously while refusing to accept basic premises; they confronted the idea of a history of "western civilization" with an "Africa" of mature civilizations and vital influence on other parts of the world.¹

Mamadou Diouf's article, which is published in this issue, brings out the rejection of "history" by intellectuals like Ashis Nandy, Ousmanne Sembene, and Archie Mafeje, a rejection of a history that confines the zigzags of time into linear pathways, privileges states over all other forms of human connection, and tells a story of "progress" inevitably leaving Africans or Asians on the side, lacking some crucial characteristic necessary to attain what is otherwise "universal."

My work on this article has been stimulated by collaboration with Mamadou Diouf on our companion pieces, and, indeed, by conversations we have had over the years. Earlier versions were presented to a CODESRIA-sponsored conference in Johannesburg in September 1998 and to the African Studies Seminar at Columbia University in March 1999. I am grateful to participants at those occasions for their comments.

Such critiques hit home, leaving unclear what to do next. Writing, talking, and performing the past in forms outside the canon of professional history have much that is valuable to add to debate in political arenas big and small. The boundaries of the canon, as much as its contents, deserve scrutiny. But if the endpoint of the critique is to dismiss rather than engage history, one risks reincarnating the old saw that Africans are people without history, adding to it that Africans are people who do not want to have one. If the only form of politics in today's world took place among self-contained blocks and bounded cultures, rejectionist arguments directed at forms of knowledge that call themselves "western" would have some utility. But Africans and people for whom Africa is a crucial point of reference are actors on a world scene, and have been so for a long time. Africa's engagement with the rest of the world has been painful and tragic, but the struggles of Africans for one or another form of liberation have, among other things, vitally affected what it means to be "free." Africans have not had an equal voice in determining what "universal" values are, but theirs has been a vital voice nonetheless.

This article takes up some historiographical implications of such an observation. It brings out the possibilities and difficulties of writing histories that neither impose a singular model of progress nor posit a kaleidoscopic world of disparate and fragmentary communities, whether fluid or rigid. It takes seriously critiques of a universality that turns out to be western, or of a nationalism that replicates imperialist categories, but it argues that that engagement and struggle have shaped what citizenship, the nation-state, and human rights actually mean. This article does not seek to wall off an objective history from political argumentation; instead, it emphasizes the importance of historical analysis in countering other historical visions on which particular images of Africa are based.

History can be invoked to project claims backward, as in evocations of a "rising" West, whose legacy to the present is democracy and progress, or evocations of an authentic ethnic past that leaders of a "community" can use to police the boundaries of the collectivity and maintain its solidarity. But historical arguments can also expose coercion and oppression and emphasize the limits of power. They can suggest that there are more possible futures and pasts

than the master narrative lets on. The material means to do history are no more equal than the distribution of military or economic power around the world, but inequality does not mean impossibility.

History and the West: The Universal, the Particular, and the Provincial

A number of "postcolonial" theorists, such as Nandy (1995, 44-66), argue that history is inseparable from its imperialist origins, that it necessarily imposes its understanding of people's past over their own. He has a point — history is no more innocent of its past than any other human endeavor, and it is a past of power and inequality, not a symmetrical past. But his argument is itself an historical one. Nandy must first reveal the power of imperialism in order to associate history with it.

The record of academic history is indeed filled with an order imposed on unruly pasts. Scholars often tell the history of literate societies while leaving the non-literate to other disciplines; they write about the formation of nation-states and shunt aside other forms of political affiliation. But the imposition of order is not unique to academic historians; the griot tells his story in a particular, structured way. Only by aggregating all sorts of renderings of the past does one come up with the idea that non-academic history is more plural, more diverse than academic history. Moreover, academic history can be mobilized to counter the very biases that it generates. There are gatekeepers within the profession — as with any other — whose self-assigned task is policing precisely this, but they do not always get their way. Struggles will be waged over what kinds of histories should be allowed "in," and it would be a political, as well as an intellectual, mistake to surrender the battlefield.

The power to shape debate is not distributed equally. But asymmetry is not dichotomy. Too neat a separation between African forms of representing an authentically African past and European modes of representing a subordinated African past makes it harder to get at the ways in which different representational strategies affect each other. The ways of approaching the past alluded to by Mudimbe and Jewsiewicki do not merely portray the virtues of an unsullied Africa; they have things to say about European rulers and their successors. And the "western" history that Nandy criticized

is not so neatly the property of the west.

How can one come to grips with the pretensions of "western" intellectuals to set forth a "universal" truth, reveal the particularistic interests beneath that posture, and still not reinforce the very European-centered vision of history that is the target in the first place? The subtle and sophisticated work of scholars associated with the Indian review *Subaltern Studies* have important things to say about this issue, but to a significant extent they remain caught in it. They wish, with good reason, to debunk the idea that "modern" Europe offers the answers to the sins of old Europe, that liberalism, democracy, and development are the cures not only for slavery and colonialism, but for the economic stagnation, the oppression of women, and the evils of caste and ethnic prejudice in "backward" societies. Some critics insist that even the "liberation" of India or Africa took place within boundaries set by the departing powers themselves — that ideas of the state, citizenship, equality of individuals, and liberal democracy framed politics in a constraining way. Anticolonial movements that aimed at participation in institutions modelled on Europe had a chance of being heard; those that did not fit into a model of individual citizen and nation-state, particularly those that expressed forms of collective solidarity and cultural distinctiveness, were excluded, sometimes brutally so. Colonial rulers were, of course, incapable of containing anticolonial movements, and sometimes — as in Indochina or Algeria — lost political control altogether, but they could shape what sorts of movements and end points were politically possible, or even imaginable. "Europe" — via the exercise of power of specific state apparatuses and by the power of its discourses — selected what parts of colonial trajectories would come to fruition and labelled them as part of "universal" progress (Chakrabarty 1992, 1-26; Guha and Spivak 1988; Chatterjee 1986, 1993).

This critique is powerful and has provoked considerable debate. In different historical moments, imperialism has to do as much with the "modern" conceit of remaking social order as with enslavement and racial domination. There is no question that in the process of politics — including anticolonial and nationalist politics — framing the limits of the permissible is crucial. But in the approach of scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, a contradiction exists. While they claim to be trying to "provincialize" the

west and its alleged values — to unmask the particularistic history beneath the claim to represent universal progress — what they do often has the reverse effect — to put the west back onto a timeless pedestal, an abstracted symbol of imperial arrogance rather than universal good, but still the reference point. Such an argument assumes that concepts such as citizenship or sovereignty or liberalism are essential and timeless attributes of “postenlightenment rationalism,” of “modernity,” or of “western political culture.” This is to underplay an important point: such concepts themselves changed their significance in the course of struggle, struggles within metropolitan polities and within empires.

Barely two years after the French Revolution broke forth with the cry of “citizen,” the revolution in Saint Domingue threw open the question of to whom the term applied, what its relationship was to slavery in the colonies, and what its relationship was to cultural distinction within a diverse and unequal “French” population. White sugar planters claimed that the “rights of man” meant that colonial citizens should have a voice in their own affairs against a distant metropole; mulatto owners of land and slaves insisted that race should be no impediment to their acting as citizens; and slaves insisted that universal rights applied to them too, and that their claims were of a higher order than the property rights of whites and mulattoes. Among the slaves, some made “Jacobin” arguments within the framework set out in Paris, while others built solidarity around religious concepts with distinctively Dahomean or Congolese roots.² This many-sided conflict made clear early on that the meanings of “citizenship,” “rights,” or “universality” would not be decided in Paris.

The Jacobin framework would be appropriated, stretched, and rejected — and would always be deployed in relation to other languages of affinity and mobilization — in the slave revolts in the French West Indies in the 1840s (and 1848 would be subject to appropriation as much as 1789), in the efforts of Blaise Diagne after 1914 to widen the meaning of citizenship for Senegalese, in the intervention of African deputies in the French parliament in 1946 to end forced labor and the distinction between citizen and subject. Struggles over such issues were crucial to the Algerian war of 1954–62, and in a different form remain unsettled in French politics now. The idea of an individual citizen — stripped of cultural markers —

acting in direct relation to a state is not an essence of liberalism, but an argument made within liberalism against other, equally "liberal," arguments, that emphasize the cultural (as well as racial and sexual) limits of political community. To the extent that the former view triumphed (in France with the extension of the vote to women in 1944; in the United States, with the voting rights act of 1965, with the admission of African states to the UN in the 1960s), it was not only a recent victory, but one that reflected the activism of women and people of African descent, and, indeed, a struggle that took place on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean (Cooper 1998).

It thus gives the "west" too much credit — and reifies a contradictory claim to an historical genealogy — to locate certain allegedly universal ideas or principles in the "west." Europe was in more than one way defined by its empire — not merely by the violence that created and maintained empires, but by the acts of appropriation coming from the colonies that made concepts like citizenship and sovereignty take on new meanings. The most basic categories of "western" political thought emerged from this unequal, but still mutual, process of constitution. Colonial encounters are not just a history of heroic, but losing, struggles against an implacable edifice. They also help to define the most "western" of values, including equality, sovereignty, non-racialism, and universal suffrage. Imperial powers tried to contain the meaning of the Saint Domingue Revolution, defining Haiti as a pariah state, but Afro-Caribbean sailors spread word about it to slaves in ports of North and South America (Scott 1986). In 1938, C.L.R. James ([1938] 1963), in *The Black Jacobins*, drew from a thorough historical account of the Revolution a powerful statement about the possibilities of pan-African, revolutionary politics in the twentieth century.

The question stemming from the critique of history and other academic disciplines is not so much the validity of the criticism, as what to do next. One can use it to erect a platform from which one continuously deflates "the West" by holding a frozen "colonialism" against an equally frozen "postenlightenment rationality," a stance that makes Europeans and everybody else into the people without history. Or one can try, as people coming from different experiences and positions, to engage the dynamics of that history. There is a lot at stake in studying history in Africa: histories offer

not only one particularity to be set against other particularities, but the possibility of examining interconnections and the changing meanings of the "universal."

Ends and Means

The production of historical writing, like the encounters it describes, does not place one on level ground. When I was a graduate student, there seemed little question that the center of intellectual action was in Africa. Historians living in Africa were well organized and conscious of their role in making and writing history. Conferences held in Dakar in 1972 and Yaounde in 1976, among others, were agenda-setting events. History departments were being founded at national universities; historians were running seminars and founding journals. For a foreigner to spend time at an African university was an intellectual privilege. In 1978-79, the University of Nairobi, where I was for much of the year, was abuzz with what became known as the Kenya Debate, a series of seminars involving scholars like Apollo Njonjo and Peter Anyang' N'yongo, over how to conceptualize the political economy of colonial and postcolonial Kenya. The Ibadan and Dar schools had by then given institutional bases to scholars working out different forms of historical analysis. Continent-spanning journals, such as *Afrika Zamani*, as well as the UNESCO project that eventually produced the *General History of Africa*, moved beyond a series of national projects to emphasize that African history as a whole was at stake.

This vitality was sapped by the oil shocks, by structural adjustment, by conflict, and by increasingly repressive politics in Kenya and other countries where sharp debate had flourished. Some of the participants in the Kenya Debate were exiled and others detained, while in most countries, university teachers had to perform at least two jobs to survive. The reproduction of intellectual vitality was not a priority for the IMF or for African governments; to some, it was even a threat. But it is important to remember the energy of the earlier years, as well as the fact that history writing, like everything else, has material foundations; the recent initiatives of CODESRIA are a hopeful sign that African institutions of research and academic exchange may be pulling out of their malaise.

The American, British, and French academies have their own peculiarities. All have benefitted from an African brain drain; in the

United States, a strong African American interest in Africa ensures that African history will be taught at a large number of institutions. It is on the whole understood that any self-respecting history department has to employ an historian of Africa — whether that person will be taken seriously is another question.³ But in disciplines such as political science, sociology, and economics, it is not at all clear that Africa needs to be talked about — it is even subject to banishment for its failure to be “interesting” in terms of the theoretical fashions of the day.⁴ In France, there is widespread talk about a crisis in African studies, about the blockages facing new generations of scholars in history and other disciplines, about the system’s uncertainties regarding the treatment of people from former colonies as colleagues or as perpetual trainees, and about the defection of leading Africanists away from African studies.⁵ But until African institutions get the means to become places of reference, as they once were, the entire field is bound to lack focus.

Whether one wants to criticize historians and other academics for their mandarin-like behavior or praise at least some of them for hard work and insight, the connection between scholarship and public discourse gives little grounds for optimism. In the United States, the Conradian imagery of Robert Kaplan (1994) in his notorious *Atlantic Monthly* article became the piece of reference for public discussion on Africa. When the Rwanda genocide broke out, newspapers immediately proclaimed it a “tribal bloodbath” — Africans living out their ancient hatreds, with nothing for the rest of the world to do but watch. In France, the high quality of published research on Rwanda and the media’s access to thoughtful and outspoken specialists did little to enlighten decision-makers during and after the events of 1994. A parliamentary investigation has revealed that cabinet-level officials were thinking — and have not learned better since — in terms of “good Hutus” and “bad Tutsis,” or of a Tutsi-Anglo-Saxon plot to take over central Africa.⁶ Such irresponsible analyses made a bad situation worse, as the French government in 1994 did nothing to stop the escalation of racist propaganda and the distribution of arms to militias by its ally, the Habyarimana government, continuing to offer it aid and comfort. As Jean Copans (1998) points out, in an exchange on the lack of influence of francophone scholarship on the image of Africa, it is not clear whether Africanists are to blame, as much as

other scholars and intellectuals who keep Africa at the margins. But distortion and willful ignorance do have their consequences.

The issue goes beyond the *mea culpas* of Africa-hands: stereotyping has its political economy and its history, and these are part of a wider story. The "ancient hatreds" thesis, applied to Rwanda or elsewhere, is an argument about the past made in the present, with a goal of affecting the future; so, too, is the counterargument — that the genocide in Rwanda has to do with ethnicization rather than ethnicity, that it came out of a history that cuts across lines of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras, that it is a Belgo-Franco-Rwandan (and American, and Central African, and international) history. Professional historians play a minor — arguably too minor — role in defining how these histories confront each other; if they contribute anything, it is to inject into contemporary discussions an insistence that historical arguments can and should be more than what anybody wants to say about the past, that the "ancient hatreds" version (of a French minister or a Rwandan *genocidaire*) is wrong because one can show, via direct reference to sources, the hatreds in the process of being constructed in recent time, that a picture that takes into account state-building from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, colonization, the struggle for resources, and internecine political feuding gives a more defensible picture of Rwandan politics. In addition, the professional historian should be conscious that his/her readers and listeners exist in the present historical moment — and there may well be reasons why the historian will not be listened to. But this counterhistory depends on taking time seriously, on taking evidence seriously, and on taking interaction seriously — all of which can be done only if the scholar looks somewhere other than where he or she is located.

History, Social Theory, and Area Studies

In its academic sense, history is like any of the disciplines that came out of nineteenth century Europe. Its practitioners try to create rules for controlling entrance; they strive to make what they do sound important to those outside the guild, while insisting that professional qualifications are essential to achieve those purposes. But academic disciplines have contents as well as structure. Historians have long had a certain confidence because their subject matter shows no signs of disappearing on them; it automatically

gets larger with time. Academic historians usually try to play things both ways: to claim professional competence regarding the past and to draw on the variety of conceptions of the past among different publics, which is what gives them an audience beyond their peers. And historians' engagement with sources, living or otherwise, is a complex phenomenon too: whether historians acknowledge or even realize it, they are not only absorbing "data" from informants or documents, but juxtaposing other sorts of historical sensibilities with their own.

At best, this interface between different visions of history — relatively free of offputting vocabulary or difficult mathematics — can mutually benefit the professional and nonprofessional historian. The historian's need to confront at least one dimension of difference — across time — may, but only may, open him or her to think about difference across space, about distinctions of power and wealth, about differences of culture. If history is talked about among people whose experiences and situations differ, a confrontation of different conceptions and uses of the past is at least possible. At its worst, history locates itself firmly within a predefined unit — the nation, the ethnic group, or even "the West." In this case, history merely reproduces over time the unit involved. Historians often write history backwards — from the present to the past — and even the current fad for constructivism — an argument that racial, ethnic, or gender units are socially constituted — usually seems to end up showing how actually "existing" units came into being. History becomes the story of winners, or at least of survivors.

But historical arguments also undermine the stability of ethnic classifications or of ancestral claims, such as the association of "democracy" with "the west," as if there has been such an invariant unity over time. Thus, many of Nandy's colleagues find his total rejection of history ineffective; they would rather engage with history than dismiss it (Chandavakar 1997). They want to make historical arguments themselves, which Nandy is also doing without admitting it. Critical approaches to the study of power — from Marxism to dependency theory to pan-Africanism — have been fundamentally historical, for power is constituted, played out, and challenged over time.

We can conclude that Africa has a great deal at stake in history and in arguments phrased historically. Viewed in static terms,

Africa is a juxtaposition of diverse languages, diverse religions, diverse kinship systems. "Africa," as Mudimbe (1988) reminds us, is an invention — in part a category born of the slave trade and colonization, in part a countercategory born not so much within the continent itself as in its diaspora. As such, Africa is — Mudimbe's point — caught within its colonial archive, an archive that remains the base of departure even if it is read critically. A plausible reimagination of Africa cannot be just anything: it is forged out of experiences, out of prior writings of those experiences, out of excavations in the archive. These writings are contestable, open to challenge from others who read experiences and archives differently. They are unequally contestable, for the resources to "do" history and the resources to shape public language are highly skewed. But those resources are not monopolies either. One never quite gets away from the colonial construction of African history, but one can engage, challenge, and refashion it.⁷ And this is done in any uneasy, ill-defined space, between professionalized research and public debate. Hence, the fundamental ambiguity of history's place in a dynamic, painful, conflict-ridden present: simultaneously reactionary and progressive, particularist and universalist, confirming "identities" and exploding the idea that "identities" exist over time.

Archives — written or oral — do not speak: they contain records placed there in non-random fashion (reflecting the bias of states, corporations, collectivities, or individuals doing the collecting or the remembering). The historian selects what to examine from a data set that is usually too big to read item by item, and too badly organized to sample systematically by some transparent criteria. The main check on how honestly and carefully this is done is fear of being made to look like a fool when someone else, perhaps with different prior conceptions, looks at the same material. The process of selecting and abstracting from raw material is a necessary one — it may be done rigorously or sloppily, in reference to explicit theorizing or in a naive belief that the archives really are speaking, but it is always being done. This imprecision in historical research is a problem, but as long as — and this is a crucial point — access to archives and to publication is relatively open, the process of research forces confrontation with the messiness of an historical moment and the uncertainties of historical actors.

Theory is part of this process; so, too, is narrativity. But both are constantly forced into juxtaposition with time-specific, place-specific, context-laden pieces of information that present both the challenge of fitting them into a systematic scheme of interpretation and the task of working out a particular puzzle.

The great weakness of historical writing is that a story well told makes the linkages of narration appear as causally necessary, even if no reflection on causation has actually taken place. The practice of historians has been deservedly criticized from two quarters, from the "hard science" side for not thinking through this problem of causation, and from the literary side for not thinking through what it means to narrate (White 1993). A constructive reply to each would invoke the other and work with — not seeking to resolve — the tension among systematic analysis of social processes, narrative style, and reflection on source material.

In short, the tension between generalization and context takes place within historians' practice. Ideally, it does so consciously; in some form, it is unavoidable. If one is stuck in a dichotomy between general rules and local contexts, between the global and the community, partisans of any position are unlikely to see very far, and certainly not likely to see the mote in their own eye. From an historian's perspective, the current debate about "area studies" versus disciplines is pointless, a "marker not of America's globalization but its imperial provincialism," as Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (1997, 201) puts it. This applies to conventionally defined cultural areas: what is African about Africa should be a question, not an assumption, and the study of social networks, of diasporas, of cultural linkages, and of affinities should follow actual patterns of movement rather than divide between pre-defined "localities" or "regions" and a vague idea of "global." This is to take "area" seriously as a concept.

But the counterpart of this should be that disciplines are equally subject to interrogation. The well-meaning collection *Africa and the Disciplines* is notable for its "defense for the study of Africa" in the name of *contributions* to disciplines as currently constituted, not to the possibility that area-centered knowledge might lead one to *question* the theories, epistemologies, or boundaries of the disciplines (Bates, Mudimbe and O'Barr 1993).⁸ One wonders whether the intemperate attack on area studies coming

from certain quarters reflects the self-confidence of particular disciplines or the opposite: worry that input coming from outside self-reinforcing knowledge schemes might be threatening.⁹ To the extent that language-training, fieldwork, cooperation with local scholars, and immersion in particular locations are devalued and young scholars are encouraged to do multi-country studies that demand little knowledge of any one place, time, or context, it is the quality of social science generally that will suffer.

Without formulating and reformulating theory, history would become arcane. But abstracting from the complexity of the particular in order to achieve more general understandings has costs — and one needs to know what they are. Any attempt to resolve the tensions between particularizing and generalizing imperatives by establishing a hierarchy — the specific is useful in so far as it confirms or disconfirms the general — impoverishes rather than enriches social science. Just as one can validly argue for pushing toward the general whenever it can be sustained, one can argue just as persuasively the other way around: nobody lives in a model, no event fits into a pattern that is entirely regular, and models are only useful in so far as they illuminate experience.¹⁰ Indeed, no serious social scientist claims that deductions relevant to each case follow from cover laws or that a variety of causal mechanisms do not impinge on each actual instance. Events emerge from chains of contingent actions, a time-specific coming together of processes that may each be systematically understandable, but whose configuration and contingencies are also of causative significance. Such a conjuncture — such a confluence of processes — may reconfigure what actors imagine to be possible in the future. To take one example, a “theory of revolution” is one thing, but thinking about the Russian Revolution of 1991 or the South African Revolution of 1994 as instances of certain regular patterns would be to miss the significance of such processes. They were not merely events emerging from a certain sequence and shaped by multiple determinations, but they were singular moments that redefined what is possible.

What counts in all of this is not “history” as a profession — which has all the foibles, blind spots, self-interest, and careerism — of any other. The best of social theory is historical to its core. Marx and Weber were not historians; the theory itself is historical. Today,

the historian can read with wry amusement (and a bit of disciplinary chauvinism) the phrases of certain social scientists who describe their own historical practices while trying not to sound like their hopelessly particularist historian colleagues — “path-dependence,” “analytical narratives.” History has consisted of analytical narratives about path-dependent phenomena since Herodotus — or maybe since somebody in Olduvai Gorge started telling stories, abstracted of course from immediate events, theorized in relation to the social knowledge of the time, rigorous in their own fashion (Bates 1997).¹¹

Area studies have never been an alternative to disciplinary practices, despite the belittling attitudes of certain advocates of the latter, but they have been a valuable complement, shaping an intellectual community that insisted that scholars should know something about someplace. However problematic the definitions of “Africa” or any other area, and however difficult it has been to encourage transregional research, the need to mobilize a range of theoretical and empirical understandings about regions pushed international scholarship into interdisciplinary activities well before interdisciplinarity became an academic buzzword. Historians have had as much need as anyone to be jolted beyond parochial tendencies, and they also contribute to other disciplines an insistence that “economic” or “political” or “linguistic” or “representational” dimensions of behavior interact in real time as real people lead their lives.

The phrases “real economics” or “real politics” are used ironically these days as a deliberate reproach to the disciplines of economics and political science, which have tendencies — despite the presence of dissidents in both fields — toward valuing theoretical elegance above messy realities. If one were to refer to “real history,” the object of the irony would not be so clear; the more pointed accusation is that historians are so intent on the real that they do not notice how reality was and is constructed. There is nothing intrinsic to politics or economics as subject matter that should take them away from reality: the issue is one of a professional gatekeeping process that devalues the kinds of training and research that make a balance between theory and practice possible.¹² Nor is there anything intrinsic to history as a field that should make it too smug to examine its own conventions about

defining fields on inquiry, for its frequent insensitivity to its own narrative practices, for its tentativeness toward studying cross-area linkages and global phenomena. Professional practice has its virtue — discipline in the ordinary-English sense of the term — but the reproduction of professions and professionals has high costs as well that should be subject to critical scrutiny.

History and Political Imagination

History does not offer lessons. But it does suggest possibilities — and apart from the specific possibilities that a rich and complex story of the past establishes — the telling at least establishes that alternatives have existed in the past, that choices have been made, that choices have consequences. A great deal depends, however, on how one does history. If one does it backwards, paths taken may appear as paths inevitably taken. Collectivities today are projected into the past, creating an “identity” of past, present, and future. History written backwards is a conservative history — much 1960s writing about African history looked for a glorious past that pointed toward a rich future, something in which ruling elites very much wanted to believe. Writing history forwards, however, puts process, choice, contingency, and explanation into the fore. The historian, clearly, has to move backwards before moving forwards, and a good dose of self-awareness and theoretical explicitness helps make such a move. Getting stuck in reverse is of little help.¹³

A history of the post-World War II era, for example, might describe not only the rise of nationalist parties, but the specific goals and actions of peasant movements, of labor unions, of groups of urban women. The history becomes richer if one avoids folding all claim-making into a single narrative of nationalist mobilization. Wage workers in French Africa in the late 1940s and early 1950s, for example, used the language of citizenship and development to demand wages equal to those of workers in France, only to find their strategy delegitimated by political leaders intent on breaking the French connection and denying the validity of different interest groups within the “nation.” One can juxtapose the territorial focus of 1950s and 1960s African nationalism — on the way particular social groups used available institutions — with the non-territorial, pan-African vision that was most salient in the 1930s and 1940s. And one can look at the different moral visions

that emerged in different peasant movements of the postwar years, which nationalist parties sometimes coopted for a time, but which sometimes turned into opposition movements against African regimes in subsequent years. Such a history, which is now emerging out of research by historians and others, is non-linear, but it does not neatly oppose statist and anti-statist, peasant and elitist, community-based and citizenship-oriented conceptions of politics, but instead puts all such visions into dynamic relationship with each other (Cooper 1996; Scarnecchia 1993; Lonsdale 1990; Feierman 1990; Kriger 1992; Allman 1993; Von Eschen 1997; Onana 1999).

What such historical reflections do is throw open the question of units of analysis — the importance of empire, state, ethnic group, locality, diasporic community, kinship group can all be demonstrated in relation to time, and the importance of each can also be relativized and contextualized by the same procedure.¹⁴ The imperialists' contention that they rightly ruled over people without history could be challenged by assertion of other histories, and the primacy of state-centered histories challenged in analogous fashion. To do so is to attempt to remake the basic units of analysis and the basic narratives of historical analysis; it is also to suggest to the reader that there may be more than one way to organize a political movement today.

History at the Moment of Liberation: Authenticity and the Nation

The beginnings of African history as a university subject did not arise from a movement within the academy. They go back to movements within Africa, because of which it made sense to challenge imperial histories on their own turf. The process intruded into a disciplinary division of labor: Africa had been the domain of anthropology; history was the record of European expansion. K. Onwuka Dike, who received his PhD in 1949 from the University of London after studying with the most established of the imperial history establishment, is sometimes called the first professional historian of Africa (see, below, however, another way of looking at this), and he made it clear in his pioneering book of 1956 that he wanted to distinguish himself from imperial historians. He was making just as important a point by positioning himself under the

mantle of history as by shifting the adjective from imperial to African. Dike's militant preface moved away from methodological imperialism as well: he insisted that oral texts, not just written ones, had a place in the canon, and, ever since, African historians would defend their legitimacy to a significant extent through methodological arguments.

But the text that followed in *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* was more of a nuanced and balanced integration of methods and questions than a militant intervention. He made his case mostly by using written archives, but by reading them in a different way from his mentors. To him, they revealed interaction, the mutual constitution of political and economic linkages, by Africans and Europeans in the cauldron of the Niger Delta. For Dike, the canoe house of the Delta was both an outgrowth of Igbo lineage systems and a well-functioning trading organization — he was not interested in debating how "African" it was. Some of his successors, however, would get more hung up on the latter question. Dike's (1956) effectiveness came from his juxtaposition of the militant preface and the respectable footnotes, and, above all, from his treatment of interaction and symbiosis in a matter-of-fact manner, as if it were perfectly obvious that Igbo were historical actors, making their way in a conjuncture, where nobody's history was really his/her "own."¹⁵

But Dike could also be read as a nationalist historian. In later years, he sometimes spoke that way, and with justification. Jacob Ajayi (1969), a later Ibadan historian, followed the nationalist interpretation, most famously in his assertion that colonialism was a mere "episode" between pre- and post-phases. But the quest for an authentic African past — for a history worthy of new nations — caught on as much with the western fellow traveller generation of Africa's independence as it did in Africa itself. My fellow graduate students at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s were afraid to do much about the colonial era because it was not African enough; most Americans avoided South African history for the same reason.

The search was on for the African voice — or the Kikuyu voice, or the Igbo voice — to be recovered by separating the wheat of genuine historical information from the chaff of distortion and selectivity in informants' memories and researchers' methodolo-

gies. While Jan Vansina and his students did admirable work in devising rigorous methodology for the use of oral evidence and while the work they produced was the best propaganda for this methodology, at times it seemed as though oral history was a fetish as much as a method. Methodology trumped theory.¹⁶ And methodology meant honing in on particulars — on making sure that the “real” history was getting told. Doing this was no small task, and it was a necessary one. But theory was likely to be dismissed as being “European,” and comparison disliked for getting away from the precise meanings of local languages. It is more useful, however, to assess the gains and losses of abstracting, comparing, linking, and theorizing than to devalue one kind of historical question in relation to another.¹⁷

For reasons that have not, to my knowledge, been sufficiently reflected upon, African novelists, more than social scientists, did most, at the earliest dates, to encourage reflection on why the narrative of African progress was not ending up as it should, to find where the independence project had gone wrong. But history was quickly enlisted to refocus debate, and Walter Rodney — and the so-called Dar es Salaam school of history — returned to “imperial” questions in the 1970s, this time from an anti-imperialist standpoint. If the situating of Africa within the “development of underdevelopment” or the making of a capitalist world system was often done in a mechanical and determinist fashion, the local and the global were at least being put into the same framework. And it was precisely in the terms of address to historical variety and historical processes that the underdevelopment school was challenged (Rodney 1972; Amin 1974).¹⁸

More recently, efforts at a self-conscious renewal in African history have refused both the quest for an authentic African past and the submission of that past to a determining imperialism. The editorial that announced the reemergence of *Afrika Zamani* (1994) observed how a history built around “a certain authenticity” had been used to justify single party regimes and advocated instead an enlarged space for democracy that was both African and universal. In the same issue, Mamadou Diouf emphasized the importance of “political imagination,” while insisting that such imagination was “necessarily of an historical order” (1994, 3).¹⁹ This points to an historical consciousness that is open to its variety — including its

contradictions and conflicts — and that is open to the rest of the world as well, in all its painful particularities.

The Global and the Fragmentary

Postmodernists sometimes argue that they offer a more fundamental challenge to ways of doing history than all the “modernist” approaches cited above, including the self-consciously critical or radical ones. There is a misreading of modernism entailed in such claims: modernism is an early twentieth century literary and cultural movement that aimed to understand critically what a complacent modern bourgeoisie did not want to confront. Decentering the subject, questioning the categories, probing the limits of rationality, establishing the constructed nature of norms and affiliations, and exposing the particularist biases and assumptions of universalism are all quintessentially “modernist.” That fragmentation — the annihilation of space by time, hybridity, or any of the buzz-words of postmodernism — has anything to do with a particular time period is also subject to skeptical examination by historians, who are likely to have observed such processes in a variety of time periods. The signalling out of the late twentieth century for special treatment as the postmodern age is likely one of the oldest fallacies known to humanity: the fallacy of self-centeredness.

A similar argument could be made about globalization, and Africa specialists are in a good position to make it: the most decisive break in creating an interconnected world occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, not in the last twenty years. Slaves from Java taken to South Africa to serve Dutch farmers or slaves from the Gulf of Benin taken to Bahia on Brazilian ships financed by British capital — producing sugar for European markets, participating in religious practices with elements originating in Arabia, West Africa, and Europe — knew only too well when “globalization” began. Linkages across the Sahara and across the Indian Ocean go back even further, helping to shape economic and political structures on both ends of trade routes. One needs to periodize carefully the relationship of Africa to these widespread processes and to put the undeniable changes of recent decades in a broader time perspective. But one should be precise about both space and time. The “global” is not quite so global in reality as it is

in theory — one needs to look at how distance-crossing relationships are structured — and the “local” is not necessarily so local either.²⁰

None of this negates the validity of much of the critical thinking of the last decades: warnings against teleologies, against over-reaching theoretical claims, against too ready an embrace (or too facile a rejection) of interconnectedness, and, above all, against the reluctance on the part of scholars in all disciplines to admit that the categories they use deserve to be the objects of analysis as much as its tools. One can learn from such critiques without turning theoretical modesty into self-indulgence, when the scholar can examine no other subject except him or herself. Most important is to learn to profit from the tensions intrinsic to intellectual inquiry, not resolving them under the hegemonic umbrella of a grand theory or allowing them to dissolve into a globalized dance of the fragments.

Mamadou Diouf raises, in these pages, the question of which conceptions of geography underlie particular sorts of historical visions. His plea for more supple conceptions of region and connection, avoiding the pitfalls of both “universal geography” and a vision of space divided into ethnicized compartments, is compelling. Trying to trace out a geography of experience offers considerable possibilities: asking where trading diasporas went and where they did not, where pilgrimage routes went and where protection and sustenance broke down, where labor migrants could find ways to tie together wage labor and family life across distance, where social linkages were destroyed, and where itinerant intellectuals could find ways to make common cause with others without losing distinctiveness.

Some of the most interesting recent work in African history and anthropology looks at the politics of neighborhood and the relationship of patronage relations at that level to national systems of power; at region, defined by tracing actual linkages, as an alternative to ethnic or national categories; at cross-regional and cross-ethnic Islamic brotherhoods and networks of scholars; at the importance of religious mediums and religious shrines across large regions and their role in different kinds of social and political mobilizations; at youth culture, which draws on varied elements to produce patterns distinct to certain cities (as in the music of

Kinshasa, influenced by African American jazz and Ghanaian high life, both remade in highly creative ways). Scholars study transatlantic linkages, from African American missionaries in South Africa to the Garvey movement, to the high-point of African American involvement in anticolonial politics in the late 1940s, to the movement of intellectuals between Africa, the Americas, and Europe. Ethnic organization has been recast by seeing it in relation to the formation of patron-client networks and to the efforts of urban migrants to discipline young men and women and maintain a coherent moral universe. Approaches that emphasize region, network, and patron-client relations — as opposed to nation, ethnic group, and status category — have enriched the study of Africa before colonization as much as after, and, above all, facilitate analyses that stress the dynamics of political and social relationships without assuming either continuity or a sharp break between “eras.”

The recent past has become more dynamic too. Guerrilla organizations sometimes turn out to be neither national nor ethnic, but more elusive networks drawing on a certain grammar of regional culture, but crossing lines of language and local politics or drawing on the ability of some leaders to bring together youth detached from other social moorings. The familiar topic of African labor can appear in a different guise when instead of studying the “structures” of the labor market, one follows workers and looks at what kind of linkages they formed among, for example, the Senegal River Valley, Dakar, and suburbs of Paris. Or one can follow the tragic experience of workers who, for a time, made successful claims to higher wages and pensions on the basis of “internationalist” visions of labor, and, later, seeing their gains and the mechanisms by which they asserted themselves eroded were thus forced to draw on different kinds of social resources.²¹

History and Progress

One of the most dubious ways of reading history is as a tale of progress — the rise of democracy, the ever-advancing movement toward a society governed by merit and not by prejudice. This reading has taken the form, of course, of privileging “the West” and evaluating the history of every other place in terms of “lacks.” Such progressivist narratives have their right-wing and left-wing

versions, from Rostow's modernization to Marxist stage-theory. The critique of both versions from *Subaltern Studies* has been biting and largely on target. Meanwhile, feminist scholars have been particularly effective in showing that new forms of exclusion often accompany political openings.

But accepting the critique of "whig" history leaves important issues on the table. Does historical analysis have anything to say about how the world came to be a place where some countries have a GNP per capita one hundred times that of others? It should. However much one criticizes concepts such as "progress" or "development," the distinctions that such words point to are a very concrete part of people's lives.²²

One version of such a history has been to praise the West (or praise Asia) and view high income as the reward for certain cultural proclivities or the consequence of certain structural attributes.²³ The critique of such arguments, from scholars such as Walter Rodney (1972) and Samir Amin (1974), was just as historical, just as global, just as developmentalist as the original: the West got rich because the rest got poor. Some Marxist analyses move beyond a simple stage theory toward structural analysis of what about capitalism has made it capable of accumulating capital and fostering technological advance at rates higher than any other system. Marx himself had some pretty sound ideas on this subject, but was way off in predicting that capitalism would simply spread. Such an approach is not just a comparative theory, but an interactive one: the interactions of Europe and Africa shape their divergent histories. This can be handled in a determinist way: "periphery," "semi-periphery," and "core" each assigned labor-forms in a capitalist world economy, with their fates accordingly determined. The problem is that the fates of the different parts of the world that have been victims of imperialism vary considerably, and the assignment of regions to the three divisions becomes tautological. Alternatively, one can analyze imperialism while giving careful attention to the particular structures at the receiving end, and ask just what the effects of particular structural interactions are.

Such an approach forces one to take seriously economic history within Africa itself — something that has been done quite well, but still presents enormous possibilities. Some scholars have taken an "Africa can do it too" approach, taking the "market economy" as a

norm of economic behavior and showing examples of Africans performing well.²⁴ Indeed, a rich literature exists on African entrepreneurship, revealing considerable adaptability of kinship systems and religious affiliations to organizing production and long-distance commerce and resourcefulness in the face of colonial regimes that repressed African economic initiative. Jane Guyer (1996), for example, refers to an African "tradition of invention" — in commerce and production, as well as political and social life. But if such research reveals that the quest to find a cultural characteristic of African societies that explains Africa's economic fate is pointless, it does not get to the bottom of the issue. There is an institutional question here — how do entrepreneurship and inventiveness turn into self-reproducing social structures that assure or, as Marx saw it, compel workers and capitalists alike to optimize their economic activities and to innovate technologically? And there is the inescapable question of Europe — not as a model, but as an actor in African history.

The latter issue needs to be reformulated. It is not Africa that is "peculiar," but Europe's path to capitalism and its momentous consequences around the world.²⁵ Marx emphasized that it was not benign trade that made capitalism special, but primitive accumulation, the separation of the population from the means of production, a phenomenon that forced property owners to buy and the propertyless to sell labor power efficiently, unleashing a social dynamic that forced productivity upward and gave a new significance to local and global commerce. Africa, of course, did not suddenly face "capitalism" at its doorstep — Africa and Europe were interacting throughout the process, including a phase when the slave trade was intimately linked to the evolution of capitalism in Europe, as well as a phase when Europe repudiated the slave trade and defined itself as the locus of free labor, insisting that the rest of the world conform to that standard.²⁶

The continental space that became Africa — in part as Africans were defined and later defined themselves in relation to this history — provided a fateful fit with the horrific demands of the growth of an Atlantic system. Africa — more so than Europe or Asia — was a hard place to exploit systematically, a discovery made by its own would-be rulers and later by a variety of would-be conquerors. Not that oppression and appropriation were strangers to the region.

Rather, the "exit option," to use Albert Hirschman's (1970) phrase, was relatively, if differentially, open, not just for geographic reasons (islands of favorable ecology surrounded by spaces where people could hide and survive), but also for social ones: kinship ties, diverse networks of affiliation, the adaptability of social systems to migration and reconstitution of polities.

The consequences of this capacity to fend off or escape routinized political control and rationalized economic exploitation were not all happy ones. They meant that kings and exploiters tried to externalize the extraction process — to avoid too much appropriation of surplus from their "own" peasants and — at times — to capture slaves from outside. The European traders offered to the most venal and insecure men of power a possibility with a particular appeal: externalizing the consumption of slave labor — and hence the problem of discipline — as well as its recruitment. When Europeans later arrogated themselves the task of stopping what they had begun and making Africa into a predictable space for rational exploitation, they ran into problems similar to those that had been faced by African rulers: they — and only when land-grabbing settlers and mineral-digging investors cooperated — had limited capacity to police access to land and supervise reliable labor forces. Colonial regimes profited where they could from African agricultural initiatives, from islands of mineral production, and from narrow communications channels, but such efforts could take them only so far.

When, in the 1940s, Great Britain and France moved to "reform" and "develop" Africa into a more systematic producer, they were admitting that they had not learned how to exploit Africa efficiently enough. And this effort also proved to be frustrated. So, too, when another set of rulers inherited an economic situation their predecessors could not resolve, and independent African rulers presided over "gatekeeper" states, able to control the interface with the outside world better than production and commerce within, at risk from struggles over access to the gate, distrustful of autonomous initiative, and tempted toward a brittle authoritarianism against a society that in some ways remained mobile and undocile. Such a schematic argument only points in the direction of possibilities for a rich history of struggles, of openings and closures. But it is an important history not just for what it says

about "Africa," but also for what it says about the power and the limits of capitalism.²⁷

What is most important here is a conception of economic history that crosses space, regards "African" and "European" structures as mutually interacting and mutually constitutive, and traces out historical threads, ongoing processes that redefine what is possible and impossible. The pioneers of making such linkages were C.L.R. James and Eric Williams, writing in the 1930s and 1940s. What is striking in their writing is the integration of a historically sophisticated analysis of capitalism in a greater-Atlantic region — and the struggles of diasporic Africans against this system — with a political project directly challenging imperialism. For James, for example, showing that the Caribbean slave plantation of the late eighteenth century was a modern enterprise — not a relic of a by-gone era — and that the Haitian revolution was the work of revolutionaries in the tradition of the French Revolution was a way of opening the possibility of antiimperialist mobilization in the 1930s and of treating this mobilization not as a racially contained phenomenon, but as a central element of a universal history. Whereas some scholars today write of local resistance to global capitalism, James saw the action of slaves as a transoceanic process just as much as capitalist development itself was. James ([1938] 1963) and Williams (1944) are often dropped from the historical canon, but their work should instead be considered central to a history that is not quite African, not quite American, not quite European — but which illuminates their historical interrelationship, a scholarship of commitment, a scholarship that affirmed universal values even as it contested what those values were and who was remaking them.

Legacy and Responsibility

Because colonialism looms large in the history of Africa's present, the question of how one comes to grips with it is of corresponding importance. One can say the same about the slave trade or apartheid, or about structural adjustment. And how does one come to grips with the history of Idi Amin or of Mobutu, of the Rwandan genocide, or of a variety of political and social experiments in the years after independence, with varying mixes of achievement, catastrophe, and unintended consequences?

History is invoked to make moral points. It lends itself to this because in following a process over time, one can see outcomes. But the relationship of outcomes to consequences can be complicated. And the question of the relationship of any history to any living person is even trickier. How does one determine what history is attached to what individual, when the threads of history are multiple and complex?²⁸

On the level of social process, the issues are complex too. Some use the word *legacy* to make clear that certain structures or actions in the past have consequences — sometimes terrible ones — long after the fact. There is a danger here too — of leapfrogging over a changing historical landscape. Defining a legacy means abstracting a particular process out of its context, jumping across time, and assigning it causal weight to processes at another time.²⁹ Arguments about the “legacy” of colonialism abstract a part, however important, of African history from the countertendencies of the era. What such an argument skips gives quite a different vision of history: the multiple mobilizations of the 1940s opened up claims to citizenship within territories, to equality within empires, to restoring harmony to the land, and to forging wide-scale religious affinity. This history can be read as one of opening and closures, forcing one to think not only of the heavy constraints of colonial institutions — whether of the “decentralized despotisms” of the 1920s and 1930s or the developmentalist colonialism of the 1940s and 1950s — but also of the alternative futures that different people imagined. The possibilities and opportunities that these movements and the profound crisis of colonialism opened up — those taken and those lost — deserve reflection, as much as do the constraints. To think of the 1940s and 1950s in such terms is to take seriously the evocative power of different liberating ideologies within their own time period, to insist on a precise analysis of why openings were closed down, to look at the rearticulation of global hierarchies as more deeply implicated in contemporary power dynamics than a mere “neo-colonialism,” and to see the last fifty years of African history as tragic — a history of hopes created and hopes destroyed.³⁰

Part of the argument is a moral one: who should be held accountable for the authoritarianism of current African rulers, for social and cultural policies that denigrate indigenous contributions

and hold up external models for emulation, for economic policies that serve a small elite at the expense of peasants and workers? One should not replace the legacy model with the light switch model, and conclude that since colonial rule was "turned off" over thirty years ago, colonial powers bear no responsibility for what happened subsequently. I would argue for distinguishing arguments about responsibility from arguments about a legacy, for the former can be contextualized. Colonial rule had its consequences, and these can be traced through the 1940s to the 1990s. That somebody like Mobutu could have come to power in an African state — and remained there as long as he did — can be explained only by analyzing a complex Euro-Americo-African co-production, growing out of the narrow possibilities of the colonial gatekeeper state, deepened by Cold War interventions and cozy relationships of certain international enterprises with the Mobutu regime, but drawing as well on the political networks forged by Mobutu and other leaders, and on the specific forms of political language worked out in Zaire itself.

One can do more. One can point to debates over responsibility at crucial historical moments, how differing conceptions of morality were at play as vital decisions were being made. B.A. Ogot (1972) and John Lonsdale (1990), for instance, look at the moral economies of loyalists and rebels during the Mau Mau emergency. And there is archival evidence on the other side. From the 1950s, documents reveal how Britain and France sought to shed responsibility. Colonial authorities knew that the governmental structures that they had set up were not working — that their development plans were failing — and they self-consciously — in some instances at least — sought to get out and leave the consequences to their successors (Cooper 1996, chapter 10). They were preparing a discourse about African incapacity at the same time that they were refusing to face the financial burdens and the political costs of the crisis-ridden developmentalist colonialism of the postwar years.

Assessing responsibility is not the same as evaluating historical consequences. Both need to be done, and both kinds of evaluations should be read against each other. And one has to be careful about looking at institutions over time. It is easy to dismiss as inappropriate "implanted" European institutions — indeed, the argument has been made about "the state" itself and is being made

these days about "democracy."³¹ But institutions are not fixed — at what point a "western" state becomes something else is not easy, or necessarily worthwhile, to establish. What is made of an institution, of a form of discourse, of religious beliefs and organization, of cultural values is itself an historical question, not reducible to "origins." And assessment of the appropriateness of institutional forms or cultural values should not presume that the unit of analysis is closed. "States," "markets," and "human rights" are constructs that take on meaning relationally — they are invoked and contested via movements of people, systems of communications, and structures of cross-boundary political relationships. African states do not have the same capacity as the rich and powerful to change world discourse or to compel others to do things their way, but the IMF or the United States are themselves incapable — as colonial powers were before them — to determine how ideas they transmit will be read and reinterpreted, how structures they seek to implant will be rebuilt, how the social relations of apparently similar institutions (a university, a bureaucracy) will be conducted in reality.

The past provides material for assessing consequences and responsibilities. As such, it is a means to engage in a moral discourse about those very issues. Such a discourse could take the form of a discourse of celebration and blame, of trying to locate credit for a complex process (democratization) in an asserted genealogy (the western tradition), of trying to allocate fault genealogically to the descendants of tyrants by the descendants of "victims." But if the future we are talking about includes a notion of accountability, it is to insist that consequences and responsibilities are debatable.

What Past for What Future?

As Mamadou Diouf makes clear elsewhere in this issue, the debate about history within Africa is not simply an academic one. Journalists, intellectuals, and artists write about it; young and old talk about it; wall writing and music make it part of everyday life. Outside of Africa, the debate is more academic than it is inside, but also varied; scholars have tried to produce a useful past, but a useful past that in some instances has focused on the nation — in others, on affiliations and networks that cut across national or even conti-

mental boundaries — and, in others, on seemingly global forces that have constrained Africa's pasts and continue to shape its future. Both academic and non-academic histories have projected claims to be a collectivity — whether ethnic, national, religious, or racial — backward in time, linking the past to both present and future. And both have revealed the inadequacy of such claims. Both have set forth other ways of linking people, linking spaces, linking times.

Even when intellectuals inside and outside of Africa were captivated by the possibilities of new nations, the nation-state was less central to history than to historiography. There was a lot going on and much to look back upon that did not fit within national borders. But the historiography never completely succumbed to the quest for a useable national past. Cheikh Anta Diop linked a continental perspective on the past to a vision of a universal civilization in which Africa played a central role. An approach stretching from James ([1938 1963] to Williams (1944) to Abdoulaye Ly (1958) to Rodney (1972) emphasized Africa's place within Atlantic, or even global, economic and political structures. But the widespread disillusionment with African nation-states in the present has undoubtedly opened the vision of historians, intellectuals, and people in a wide variety of situations to other ways of imagining collectivities.

Projecting nations backward was one of the fallacies of nationalist historiography; projecting communities of different sorts backward is equally fallacious. But it is possible to write histories of the opening up of possibilities in certain conjunctures, and the closing down of possibilities in others, of paths taken and paths ignored, of linkages made and linkages severed.

Merely celebrating a proliferation of pasts or the destabilization of narratives does not advance the writing of history or clear thinking about political issues. At one extreme, to dissolve all structures into fragments is to surrender the tools to analyze structures in which power coheres, from multinational corporations to Euroamerican states, and to discourage thinking about organizing on a large scale as well. On the other extreme, to subsume the present under the rubric of "globalization" takes away from examining the sequence of reconfigurations of spatial relationships, with their long and varied histories, and from understanding the limits of the networks and structures that exercise power across long

distances.

The pasts which future historians will narrate, like the future itself, are no more likely than today's pasts to be marked by equality — in access to material resources or in the ability to frame the terms of political discourse in international arenas. But there will be important struggles within those arenas and about the definition of those arenas in the future, as there have long been. Those struggles will not open up an infinity of choice, but they will not be without possibility either. The very recent liberation of South Africa from a racist yoke and of Eastern Europe from another form of imperialism is a reminder that history is not at an end, that seemingly solid power blocks — whose existence has seemed "normal" within our lifetimes — can fall apart. The unimaginable sometimes comes to appear ordinary. However important it is to understand the boundaries within which mobilizations in the name of freedom and sovereignty have taken place, one should also remember that there has been a great deal to struggle over. Compared to visions of history that emphasize national destiny, the all-determining power of a world system, or the self-contained integrity of particular social groups, the kind of history writing that both Diouf and I have in different ways been emphasizing offers the hope of a more precise engagement with the strength and the limits of political, economic, and cultural power, with the strength and limits of Africa's place in the world, and with the strength and limits of old and new ways of defining connections and mobilizing collectively.

Studying history introduces a tension between what people in the past imagined they could do and what they could actually accomplish, and it reminds us of the tension between what we see today and what we imagine can be. Reflecting on historical processes confronts us with the tension between the contingency of processes and the fact of outcomes, with multiple possibilities that narrow into singular resolutions, yet lead to new possibilities and constraints. The doing of history introduces a tension between the historian's act of reconstruction and synthesis — with its roots in the historian's present — and the fragments of the past that appear in all their elusive vigor — in interviews, letters, newspaper articles, and court records. These are creative tensions, and efforts to resolve them not only would be in vain, but would impoverish

the history we write. To recognize such tensions, to avoid being paralyzed by them, and to use them in developing a fruitful engagement with different pasts poses a fundamental challenge to historians, and indeed to anyone concerned about the world we live in.

Notes

¹ Other scholars, such as David William Cohen (1994), have also addressed the importance of historical discourses within Africa.

² It is worth reading, side by side, James ([1938] 1963) and Trouillot (1995), the latter of whom emphasizes what James' Jacobin interpretation leaves out.

³ If racial politics in the United States has made African history an important reference point, the consequences are sometimes thoughtful examinations of complex issues and sometimes unedifying polemics.

⁴ In 1990, I met one of the revered founding fathers of American comparative politics, who, on learning of my area of specialization, commented, "nothing interesting is happening in African politics." Whereas at one time, modernization theory had led political scientists and sociologists to look toward Africa — and not leave its study to anthropologists — Africa's failure to behave in accordance with the theory seems to have led many of those disciplines to abandon the continent.

⁵ See the series of articles in *Politique Africaine* (1996-98), including interventions by Charles Didier Gondola, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, and Jean Copans.

⁶ Among various pleas of ignorance and several bizarre theories about threats to French interests in Rwanda, as openly expressed to the Parliamentary investigation, one Cabinet Minister's thesis stands out: "Rwanda: les bons Hutus et les méchants Tutsis de Robert Galley," *Le Monde* 15 May 1998.

⁷ See the influential article by Guha (1988).

⁸ See, especially, the editors' "Introduction," xii. An exception is Steven Feierman's article on history.

⁹ In the 1950s, the Committee on Comparative Politics of the Social Science Research Council in the United States jumped on the bandwagon of modernization theory. Fortunately, the tradition of empiricism was also strong in American social science and the foundations were interested in accumulating knowledge about various regions of the world. An emphasis on fieldwork and interdisciplinary understanding of different areas ensured that political scientists would get sufficiently diverse experience on the ground to realize that modernization theory was inadequate for the puzzles they had to solve. Some of the attacks on modernization theory came from dissident scholars who rejected its assumptions, but its decline

had much to do with a confrontation of different sorts of knowledge within fields like political science. An influential, timely example of the "internal" critique is Zolberg (1966).

¹⁰ The same argument would apply to a political scientist seeking to understand the present as to an historian seeking to understand the past. As Michael Chege notes of the intellectual scene in African universities in the 1960s and 1970s, western theory was constantly challenged with "proving its local relevance" (1997, 136).

¹¹ Bates' effort to find common ground in the area wars via an agreement to make use of analytical narratives is positive; indeed, it makes me want to welcome him to the historians' club. While Bates emphasizes theorization and rigor, these are relative terms. Some historians are less explicit than others about the abstracting process, but they do it nonetheless. Two further quibbles: abstracting and model-building from a particular narrative have costs as well as benefits, and this fact should be made explicit. And the implicit hierarchy in Bates' approach — that the model is worth more than the instance — could just as easily be reversed. Better to leave them in reciprocal relationship to one another.

¹² Christian Coulon (1997, 95) suggests that political scientists working on Africa have profited from being on the margins of their discipline, for they have been in dialogue with other disciplines and less absorbed in the "often rigid" constructions of their more centrally located codisciplinarians.

¹³ For a challenging analysis that continuously forces the reader to work backward from the memories of present-day informants to come to grips with a history of how, over time, modes of mutual representation, understanding, and interaction were constructed by people in the "middle" of a long relationship of missionaries, officials, converts, and patients at a mission hospital in the Belgian Congo, see Hunt (1999).

¹⁴ It is often forgotten that some anthropologists in the 1950s were trying to break open the tribal bounds of their own intellectual ancestors and explore new units of analysis: the network, the situation, the social field. See, in particular, the work of Georges Balandier, Max Gluckman, A.L. Epstein, and J.C. Mitchell. These concepts have fallen into unjustified neglect, and they have more to offer than the vague notion of "global" flows and scapes that has come into fashion lately. A recent example of the creative analysis of transoceanic linkages in shaping a unit of affinity is Matory (1999).

¹⁵ For an equivalent francophone study, see Ly (1958).

¹⁶ One of the most important, early, terrain-clearing publications in the field of African history, based on a conference held in Dakar in 1961, stated in its first paragraph, "Every self-conscious nation looks back upon its past" (Vansina, Mauny and Thomas 1964, 59). The national unit was the starting

point; the direction of the gaze was backward. By the second page, the statement had moved to techniques of research — oral history and linguistics. Theoretical or epistemological questions were barely touched on. See "Introductory Summary" to Vansina, Mauny and Thomas (1964, 59-103).

¹⁷ One should note, as well, Hunt's observation: "The discovery of the oral virtually *as* African history in the 1950s translated into a disparagement of European sources until the 1980s, when they were revalued as 'discourse.'" The unspoken slogan of the researcher on the colonial era was, "to Africa for voices, to Europe for texts." Hunt's own work draws as well on writings of mission converts and interviews with missionaries to bring out "multiple and sequential meetings" rather than "an epic of colonial encounter" (1999, 23-24).

¹⁸ For a critical perspective, see Cooper, Isaacman, Mallon, Roseberry and Stern (1993).

¹⁹ The Director of IFAN, Djibril Samb, also criticized "eulogies exalting African specificity," but looked toward a different conception of what is African — "plural, rich, diverse, problematic." See, "Réafricaniser l'Afrique pour affronter l'An 2000," *Bulletin de l'IFAN* 1996, 47, serB, 2: 11, 16, 17.

²⁰ For an overly glib approach to these issues — evincing remarkably little curiosity about how relationships across long distance are actually structured and bounded and changed over time — see Appadurai (1996).

²¹ For some examples along these lines, see Barnes (1986), Barry (1998), Villaron (1995), Bazenguissa-Ganga (1997), Lan (1985), Richards (1996), White (2000), Appiah (1992), Ferguson (1999), Mbembe (1988), Fields (1985), Gondola (1997), d'Almeida Topor, Coquery-Vidrovitch and Goerg (1992), Martin (1995).

²² The importance of examining concepts such as "development," without losing sight of the human problems they are intended to address, is stressed in Cooper and Packard (1997).

²³ Such arguments have by no means disappeared. See Landes (1998).

²⁴ Hopkins (1973) did this with sophistication, writing at a time when such an argument was, in fact, a breakthrough. Iliffe (1983) began with hints that his work would involve an examination of structures, but he ended up very close to a celebration of African capitalists and a criticism of anyone [colonialists or Kwame Nkrumah] who got in their way. Leonard Harding (1996), however, has asked why the entrepreneurship, mobilization of trading networks, and amassing of wealth by African merchants did not lead to a more thorough remaking of society.

²⁵ For an illuminating new study of when and where patterns of economic change run in parallel, and when and where they diverge, see Pomeranz (2000).

²⁶ For another interpretation of the transoceanic character of African history and its intimate relation to themes of American and European histories, see Miller (1999). Slave trade scholarship has long been, and remains, a rich field in African studies.

²⁷ This kind of argument also points to why African was represented in European discourse in particular ways. A fuller — but still schematic — version appears in Cooper (1999, 391-418). For a long-term look at a particular part of Africa where pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial rulers sought external means of accumulation and distrusted more local activities, see Peel (1983).

²⁸ This question is raised in Michaels (1995, 32-62).

²⁹ A notorious example of a legacy argument is the Moynihan report on the African American family, which attributed the prevalence of single-parent households in American cities in the 1960s to the way in which slavery undermined male slaves' ability to protect their own children and hence their sense of family responsibility. Such an argument takes two arguably correct statements — that slavery had horrible effects on family life in the early nineteenth century and that male-absent families were more common among African Americans than among European Americans in the mid-twentieth century — and concludes that the latter is a "legacy" of the former. The empirical problem here is decontextualization — ignoring the counterstrategies of slave families to cope with their situation — and detemporalization — skipping over all the history in between. The political problem lies in placing responsibility for a social problem safely in the past, occluding the difficult question of the extent to which the patterns of employment, urbanization, and racial discrimination in the twentieth century shaped affected African American families.

³⁰ These remarks concern Mahmood Mamdani's thought-provoking but problematic book, *Subject and Citizen: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (1996). I have spelled out my argument at greater length in a review (Cooper 1997). See, also, the debate between Mamdani and his critics in *Politique Africaine* (1999) 73: 193-211.

³¹ Basil Davidson (1992) argues in such terms against the imposition of "the state," in the process treating states as unchanging blocks, unaffected by mobilizations and claims, yet affecting everything around them. The argument about democracy has taken place, among other places, in the pages of the *Bulletin of CODESRIA*, in Constantin and Coulon (1997), and in Beauchamp (1997). The issue is not to abstract a set of principles labelled "democracy" and a set of conditions labelled "Africa," but to examine how democratic principles are used and transformed in a variety of African contexts.

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