Africanists and Responsibility: Some Reflections

GUEST EDITOR: MARC EPPRECHT

Afro-pessimism is a widespread sentiment in the corporate media and in universities in the West. Even among those who research and teach African Studies, feelings of doubt about the value of our work and lack of confidence in the future are fairly commonplace. Gavin Kitching articulated such feelings in an article that outlined why he was depressed about Africa and African Studies.[1] This included, first, that "sub-Saharan Africa" has experienced steady economic decline and political failure for the past three decades and presumably will for the foreseeable future largely because its elites are "exploitative, selfish and corrupt." Second, this failure cannot be explained by either earlier or current analytic models, especially in light of developmental successes by countries in Asia. Third, not knowing precisely what the problem is, it is impossible to know what to do. Finally, political paralysis is exacerbated by a sterile, accusatory polarization between "externalists" (who blame the wicked imperialists for the mess) and "internalists" (who fault African incompetence, culture, cupidity, etc.). Compounding the problem in this view is that pervasive European guilt prevents Europeans from saying what they truly believe. African dependency meanwhile supposedly enables Africans to avoid painful truths about themselves. This creates a situation where Africanist scholars are *de facto* complicit in perpetuating tyranny and criminally inept governance. Indeed, in a subsequent interview Dr. Kitching described as "imperialist" those Western scholars who do not forcefully denounce African elites.[2]

Dr. Kitching concludes by urging Africanists to berate Africans for their shortcomings:

The prime responsibility for making a decent future for Africa's people lies, has lain for at least 30 years, and from now on always will lie, on the shoulders of the continent's own governing elites. Simply to say that, to keep saying it, and to keep saying *why* it is true to any and all *African* people who will listen, this must be the predominant political objective of the Africanist profession at this historical juncture (emphasis in the original).

Kitching's polemic came to my attention at what is surely an important juncture for Africa and Africanists. In Canada, the federal government has just announced a large increase in development assistance and debt forgiveness even as the crisis in Zimbabwe severely tests African commitment to good governance and "peer review." In the United States, President Bush has announced a multi-billion dollar commitment to the fight against AIDS in Africa while at the same time scuppering World Trade Organization negotiations on low-cost anti-retrovirals. A tentative peace accord is being reached in the DRC, while former developmental star Cte d'Ivoire deteriorates into vicious war.

Marc Epprecht teaches in the History Department and Development Studies Program at Queen's University. He is the author of `This matter of women is getting very bad': Gender, Development, and Politics in Colonial Lesotho, 1870-1965. Another book is in press about the history of same-sex sexuality and homophobia in southern Africa.

All in all, it seemed to me an opportune moment to ask friends and colleagues to reflect upon the existential questions that Dr. Kitching and other Afro-pessimists have raised. Under pressure of a tight deadline, the circle was small and in no way representative of Africanist opinion. I also invited several scholars from other areas afflicted by imperialism of various sorts to gain their perspective - a single Latin Americanist graciously agreed to comment.

The aim of what follows is clearly not to settle the big burning questions. Rather, it is simply to promote further reflection among those of us who continue to put their energy into trying to understand - and to communicate in a fair manner - why so much of Africa has failed to live up to its developmental potential. I hope as well that it prompts readers to question the extent of our responsibility as scholars in both contributing to this failure and to seeking ways out of it.

Notes:

1. G. Kitching, "Why I gave up African Studies," *Mots Pluriels* no. 16 (Dec. 2000)
2. Danny Postel, "Out of Africa: A pioneer of African studies explains why he left the field, and provokes a firestorm of debate within it," *Chronicle of Higher Education,* 28 March, 2003. http://chronicle.com/free/v49/i29/29a01601.htm.

Reference Style: The following is the suggested format for referencing this article: Epprecht, Mark. " Africanists and Responsibility: Some Reflections ." African Studies Quarterly 7, no.2&3: [online] URL: http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v7/v7i2a11.htm