

## The “Politics of the Mirror”: On Geography and Afro-Pessimism

---

Jeff Popke

*In many respects Africa is a mirror. However distorting it may be, it reflects our own political image and has a lot to teach us about the springs of our western modernity.*

– Jean-François Bayart (1993, 269)

As we enter the new millennium, the immediate outlook for the countries of Africa appears decidedly mixed. The positive side has witnessed a return to democratic elections in Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal; “consolidating” elections in Mozambique and Namibia; and sustained, if modest, economic growth in a number of countries, including Benin, Botswana, Cote D’Ivoire, Ghana, Mozambique, Senegal, and Uganda. Consensus is emerging around an alternative model of African development, first articulated in the so-called Lagos Plan of Action in 1980, and subsequently developed into an alternative to structural adjustment programs (United Nations 1990; Oloka-Onyango 1995; Mkandawire and Soludo 1999). The African Alternative Framework emphasizes popular participation in the development process, arguing that “adjustment must be for the benefit of the majority of the people and as such, adjustment programs must derive from within” (UN Economic Commission for Africa 1991, 12). Calls for debt relief, such as the Dakar Declaration of December 2000 assert the need for a truly African form of development (Dakar-2000, 2000). There is even recent talk of an “African Renaissance,” articulated by new African leaders such as Yoweri Museveni (2000) and Thabo Mbeki (1999, 2000).

At the same time, there are reasons to be less sanguine. We see troubled elections in Cote d’Ivoire and Tanzania; increasing civic unrest and state repression in Mugabe’s Zimbabwe and Moi’s Kenya; conflict and continued tension between Eritrea and Ethiopia and civil wars in Angola, the Congo region, Burundi and Sudan; and the continuing struggle of “collapsed states” such as Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia and Sierra Leone to regain some measure of stability. We can add to this crushing poverty in many parts of the continent, a staggering debt burden in most countries, recurring drought in the Horn and flooding in the south, and the devastating impacts of HIV/AIDS. Understanding the complex roots of these problems and posing potential solutions are challenges for all of us who care about the African continent and its inhabitants.