

## A Geographer Reflects on Africa

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Dan Weiner

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This article is an edited narrative from an interview between the editor of the *African Geographical Review* and Professor Weiner.

*In what ways does Africa illustrate the pitfalls and potentials of contemporary processes of globalization? Do you see impetus for change? Where do you see collective resistance emerging on the continent? And what can we learn from such movements?*

Africa is probably the region that has suffered the most from globalization ... and we're talking about centuries of globalization. For me, globalization is something that has to be put in the context of a long period of time. The power of history is a key theme in this context. Without an historical and geographic perspective on globalization, it's very hard to understand contemporary Africa. People tend to think of globalization in terms of the 1980s; that is, the industrial transition from fordism to flexible accumulation. But for an African, globalization began with the Swahili gold trade in East Africa, the slave trade in all regions, Sahara caravans to the Middle East, etc. ... that would be my starting point. Then history compounds itself generationally. When 25 percent of the women in Soweto report that their first sexual encounter is rape you have to think about the power of history because that's not African, there's no place in the world where that is normal. What creates these pathologies? These are historical processes associated with extreme socio-spatial marginalization and oppression.

I see many local struggles, but nowhere on the continent do I see a unified movement. Given the social reproduction crises in some parts of Africa, it's very difficult for people to organize a resistance at all. It's hard to organize in any meaningful way while just trying to survive. Plus certain regimes are quite brutal. Although many people's aspirations are strong – probably as strong as they have ever been – unfortunately, African resistance to globalization is not a very important factor in its totality.

The demobilization of the mass democratic movement in South Africa is a case in point. One thing that really struck me while working in South Africa was how local organizations dissolved during the transition period of 1988 to 1994. Encouraging a centralized state was part of a strategy by the international community ... a strategy that I think that was a very successful. Politics

quickly became top down, electoral, and bourgeois. The ANC, exiles, and certain elements of the state emerged into a unified political force while grassroots organizations – which were at some level very localized and crude, but on another level were very sophisticated – were demobilized. That the mass democratic movement was effectively marginalized during that period allowed for an elitist trajectory of transition, which is only now beginning to get attention locally. Many South Africans are very upset, angry, and disappointed with what's happened.

*Most African countries have adopted World Bank structural adjustment programs that emphasize "the privatization of everything" (Michael Watts' felicitous phrase). Give us a synopsis of what you see as "the good," "the bad," and "the ugly" of structural adjustment after twenty years of implementation, and counting.*

The good? There is some truth to the importance of competitiveness. In a capitalist global economy, whether we like it or not, one has to be competitive. And in the case of South Africa, for example, globalization is a mechanism creating more competitive industry. This is an important and positive development in post-apartheid South Africa that is not well recognized or researched, particularly within the academic left.

The bad? The problem, of course, is quite obvious. With competitive forces comes reduced revenue from the state and a subsequent decline in access to critical social services, such as health care, water, and education. Unemployment is also a big problem, as economic growth does not absorb enough new workers and some existing workers are made redundant.

The ugly? The ugly is the people dying. There are a lot of people who aren't surviving globalization. It's as stark, simple, and awful as that. In globalization, there are winners and there are losers and, unfortunately, in the African continent there are more losers than winners.

*Do you remain a staunch critic of structural adjustment?*

Yes, I think structural adjustment is a mechanism by which the core maintains its hegemony over the periphery, the North over the South. However, I would not advocate the dependency theory of delinking. The real question is this: How do you link in a way that benefits as many people as possible?

Take the case of South Africa, for example. They could have taken a social democratic path. The conditions were ripe for social democracy in South Africa. It still might happen, but there is no evidence of a significant deviation from GEAR neo-liberalism. This policy supports social and spatial uneven development and the rapid transition from race to class (and race)-based inequality. As

already indicated, however, the contradiction is that structural adjustment is creating more efficient industry even though it is laying-off people. It is creating more competitiveness for the South African economy. So, it's a question of how you engage in the global economy. You can sit around as a left wing academic and say you shouldn't engage in the global economy, but that is nonsense. It doesn't make any sense. If we were economic Ministers, we couldn't do that. You have to engage – the question is how?

*So where are the positive models in Africa?*

That's a good question. I think the South African story is still being written even though there are disturbing tendencies in terms of the elitist nature of that transition. But the story is not over yet. The potential for South Africa to generate a significant middle class and to really create a better life for the majority of people is still there. Although Tanzanian socialism was a failure in terms of production, it was not a failure in terms of consumption. I think people tend to forget that *ujaama*, with all its problems, actually increased literacy and improved Tanzanians' access to health care. Positive things went on. But now the focus is predominantly on the production side whereby the issues of reproduction, consumption, and basic needs aren't seen to be as important. Botswana has also been a model of stability.

*At the regional International Geographic Union meetings in Durban last August you bemoaned some presenters' perspectives as outdated. What viewpoints seemed so redundant? And therefore, what geographic work on Africa do you find most relevant, or "progressive," as you might be apt to put it?*

The last thirty years has produced a tremendous amount of high quality research. There are all kinds of interesting and important research related to cultural ecology, political ecology, environment and development, tourism, and urbanization. Africa has also been a terrain for debating development theory – modernization, dependency, theories of imperialism, and post-development. However, I've begun to view some of the work that we do ("we" being people of the North) as a form of exploitation. As an individual, who has traveled to Africa once or twice a year for over twenty years, I've watched physical and social infrastructure collapse and conditions deteriorate. I have also lost many friends to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. During this period, I have watched a constant stream of Westerners come in, do research, and leave. This form of exploitation has left a bad taste in my mouth. This won't be a popular comment, but the essential nature of academia is that we are part of a middle class and elite institution that needs to produce knowledge to

reproduce themselves. So, when we go into the field we're essentially expropriating other people's information and knowledge for our own benefit. This kind of exploitation is what I was reacting to at the IGU conference (it wasn't about individuals per se). Most academics are very well intentioned – they are doing what they have been mentored to do – but in the big scheme of things, you look at these villages and people that are left behind, and wonder what they must be thinking as western researchers come back and forth, again and again. Working in a region where one third of the adult population is HIV positive makes it difficult to simply collect data, then go home and write. When you're dealing with a society that is struggling so deeply, my opinion is that research should be, at a minimum, empowering local researchers. Second, I think there are tremendous opportunities for doing research that is linked to local issues of transformation. We struggle with this as academics because promotion and tenure committees are not interested in how we have contributed to land reform or the development of wells and water. In fact, such "applied" work is often seen as not being theoretical and therefore not of high quality. So there is a real contradiction in the academy, which I think plays itself out in the African landscape.

*This journal aims "to promote a better representation of African scholarship." You've done lots of collaborative work with colleagues in Africa. What are keys to successful collaborative research?*

First, helping to bring Africans here for education. The most important thing to me, besides finishing, is that students return home. I don't want to train Africans to work in New Jersey. That might happen, but many students do return and contribute to their society. Second, create projects that fund African students in Africa. At the moment, for example, we have such a project in Mozambique and South Africa. A number of students are working on local community geographic information systems, which helps develop human resources at two institutions as well as methods for doing community GIS work and linking that to local policy. It's not easy, but that's what we're doing. Third, when publishing, it's really important to treat our collaborators as true partners. Paying people money, but not allowing them to contribute to the publication side is very problematic. A lot of academics in Africa are very busy, and the most productive scholars often get caught up in administrative work. So you have to go the "extra mile" to help. One way is to bring them over for several months and provide space to write. These are some practices that I think are important.

*Do you see examples of "development tourism" in the guise of geographic research? What do they look like? Or reverse the question: if you held the purse strings what research would you fund? And why?*

One thing that I ask students is how would you feel if a group of Africans showed up in a Jeep, and said "We're going to spend a month in your town, conduct surveys and ask lots of questions," then disappeared and wrote it up in an African journal? Think about that. And then they came back for longitudinal data ten years later! ... and you were very hospitable each time. But you never saw anything, never got a copy of the book, they just expected you to be hospitable and provide a cultural experience. Just flip it around. It's a weird idea.

The academy wants us to produce theory. So let's produce theory about a continent where a large percentage of the population is struggling and certain segments are not surviving. Let's produce theory about that and I am not thinking about Malthusian theory, of course. Theories are very important to understand what's going on, but they don't resolve the contradictions that I just articulated. Yet there must be spaces by which one can produce theory and do useful applied work at the same time. That's what I've done my entire career. My first research project in Africa was with a team headed by Phil O'Keefe. We modeled the demand and supply of woodfuel in Kenya and started an agro-forestry project that still remains successful; people continue to draw wood from the project and it is a model for the region. With this project, we produced theory about rural sustainable development, and then I went on to link modes of production with theories of nature and society. So it can be done. You can do both. That's what I would urge non-tenured and tenured faculty to do.

*Are we losing good models and mentors?*

I had good mentors and there are many good mentors out there. There is a wealth of experience in Africa. Are we losing good models? That's a good question.

*What are the possibilities and limitations of Western theoretical debates for understanding Africa and, conversely, what are ways that African realities can potentially critique and transform theory?*

My problem, and I'll be perfectly honest with you, is that I still believe in meta-narratives. Sorry, but I cannot think about Africa without looking at the issue of patriarchy. Patriarchy is not the same everywhere and in parts of West Africa there are matriarchal societies. But patriarchy as a meta-narrative is critical, not just for Africa, but everywhere. In fact, I believe the con-

dition of women in Africa, in much of Africa at least, has deteriorated over the last two to three hundred years. The questions are why. Although complex questions, I think you have to start with the meta-narrative of African patriarchy and then ground it in particular historical and geographical experiences. Trained as a radical geographer, I have not been able to make the post-modern turn or see literary theories as more than an intensely bourgeois and self-promoting.

Part of the bourgeois nature of what we do in the academy is to create new ideas even though we don't have them. The post-modern turn has the illusion of being progressive because it deconstructs people's everyday life experiences, but in reality, I think, it's taken us away from development and progressive interactions with communities. Even the whole idea of development has been thrown out. But when you go into an African village, people want water, roads, and electricity. We must resolve the contradictions between theoretical abstraction and what people on the ground are looking for... something that we're not particularly good at doing.

*Which theoretical constructs do you find have the most "traction"? And why?*

There are many. Political ecology is a powerful conceptual framework because it makes a lot of sense in the African context, but many others work very well in Africa as well. I do think we really need to be thinking about peripheral capitalism and how peripheral capitalism as an abstraction is place-based. The issue of scale is also very important. There are lots of opportunities to build on the work of people like Sarah Berry and Richard Sandberg, who examine the relationship between local political structures and global capitalist structures, and how they create particular forms in specific places. Environment and development is a broad category, but Africa remains an important laboratory to look at theories of development, including the relationship between nature and society.

*Does theory inform your work any more or less than when you began thinking and writing about Africa twenty years ago?*

I still do both. My most recent work concerns the integration of GIS with communities and the linking of geo-spatial technologies with political ecology.

*What's on your "must-read list" for Africa? Give us a couple authors whose ideas or insights have caught your attention. What original ideas, new insights, or primary data do they offer?*

Most of my list isn't recent material, but classics like Basil Davidson on

history. Mamdani's piece on democratic institutions is a recent work. I think Ben Wisner's work on basic needs is as good as it gets. Judith Carney's work on gender, Michael's [Watts] work on political ecology ... these are all classics. Sarah Berry has had an impact on me in the way she has constructed politics in Africa.

*You've had occasions to have first-hand experience in several African countries. Give us some commentary. It's hard to believe that Zimbabwe is on the brink of collapse. What lessons are there from that nation's rapid descent from "success story" to the brink of collapse? And what are your post-election thoughts about Kenya?*

I've been reading a little bit about Mugabe. Here's a guy who had tragic loses as a child – apparently lost his father and brother. At just the point when he was to be initiated as an African male, he was losing his important African men, and he also lost a son as a young adult. There's a whole psychological profile which I'm certainly not qualified to do, but it's got me thinking about psychological aspects of development, how somebody like Mugabe comes about. These are important issues around development that we haven't thought a lot about; how forms of power and patriarchy can become pathologic as opposed to forms of patriarchy, which in the past one might want to call reciprocal and a little bit more friendly ... again I think this illustrates the power of history. If I had six months to read, I would be interested in issues of psychology and development and the making of leaders like Mugabe. What happens to these people? They get into power and become, some of them, absolutely brutal. I have friends in South Africa who have become super wealthy, corrupt, and don't seem to give a damn about ordinary people. These are so-called "progressives" of the past. Obviously, that power corrupts is not a new idea, but it needs to be put in the context of African patriarchy and levels of brutality of the African state.

"African fascism" is another thing I've been thinking about ... although it's beyond my area of research. We use the terms fascism for Europe, tribalism for Africa, and ethnicity for the former Yugoslavia. Should we be thinking about something called "African fascism"? Is fascism a term that we could use in certain particular cases or is that just something that is reserved for the 20<sup>th</sup> century, European theater? ... This is something to think about because I would argue it's a fascist regime in Zimbabwe at this time. It's not tribalism at all, nothing to do with tribalism. They took care of that in the early '80s, when everyone loved Mugabe, they were out there beating on the Ndebele. That happened a long time ago. Today Mugabe's regime is about pure power and

military might and trying to prevent any kind of democratic institutions from holding sway.

The outcome of the Kenyan election? The Kenyan election seems like a very positive event to me. I haven't really heard a lot about what's happened since, but the Kenyan students that I've spoken to and the little that I've read about it, I'm extremely pleased. If Mugabe, in 1990, had decided to leave, he would have been a hero. Just the fact that elections took place in Kenya does give me some hope.

*Why do you keep going back? What are your reasons for hope? Where do you see hope coming from?*

Hope? That goes back to the initial idea of globalization. I think when you look at globalization you have to look at the issue of scale. There are places and people in Africa benefiting from globalization. There's a growing middle class, there are nice houses, clean and available water. So-called "modernization" is taking place. But look at the places and spaces in Africa that are deteriorating regarding people's quality of life. You have to look at them, again, in view of the power of history. For example, understanding regional differences in the severity of the AIDS pandemic requires looking at the establishment of a labor reserve economy in Southern Africa. Processes that have taken a long time to develop are now being accelerated.

Here's the final point that I want make. I believe the catastrophic demographic crisis due to HIV and other diseases – as well as the political breakdown in many African nations – create the conditions for a renaissance in Africa for future generations. It's hard to think of it in these terms, but even as happened in Europe, I think Africa will no longer be seen as overpopulated. Africa has tremendous natural resources. Once this crisis has played itself out the conditions for an African renaissance will be there. Those of us who care and have spent their adult life working in Africa need to help create the conditions now for the seeds of this renaissance in the future.

Nazi Germany emerged as German social democracy after the war, and this is most remarkable. I'm a Jew, my family was burned alive in the holocaust, and yet, I see young Germans as some of the most progressive, caring people I have met ... and their grandparents were killing my ancestors. So what I'm getting at is that out of these crises might come seeds of the future. That's what I'm looking in Africa for. Those of us, who think seriously about these issues, we need to keep our eyes on that and not get overwhelmed by the tragedies of people at this particular time. I have a lot of students here from Africa who would love to go home and do it right, and be good teachers,

honest politicians and good engineers. They are desperate for that. It's just that they can't because the conditions aren't right to do it. There are thousands of them all over the world that want to go home – be good citizens, good people, and help to develop the African continent.



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