

Arno Sonderegger (ed.)

**African Thoughts on  
Colonial and Neo-Colonial Worlds**

**Facets of an Intellectual History of Africa**

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## Facets of an Intellectual History of Africa

### Reflecting Colonial and Neo-Colonial Worlds

Arno Sonderegger

The plan for this book goes back to a conference devoted to African intellectual history held at the African Studies Department of the University of Vienna last year. It sets out to highlight the history of specific ideas and views on colonialism and post-independence relations as unfolding in the works, thoughts and actions of particular African intellectuals. Papers delivered looked at Africans stemming from various parts of the continent and the African diaspora. Additionally, they emphasized several specific issues relevant to African thought – such as the role of power and privilege in knowledge production, questions of epistemology in an African context, as well as the search for African authenticity and for suitable paths and models of development. The selection of articles included in this volume gives an accurate, though hardly all-embracing, impression of the wide range of topics and personalities that come to mind in any endeavor of writing an intellectual history of Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup>

It is not easy to define intellectual history, because it “is an unusual discipline, eclectic in both method and subject matter and therefore

1 See the conference report by Arno Sonderegger: African Thoughts on (Neo-) Colonial Worlds: Steps towards an Intellectual History of Africa 06.11.2014–07.11.2014 Wien. In: *H-Soz-Kult*, 16.12.2014. <http://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-5732> (accessed 13.02.2015). A longer version including names and topics of those selected to the conference but eventually unable to participate, as well as the full program, can be found at: <http://afrika.univie.ac.at/veranstaltungen/konferenzen/> (accessed 13.02.2015).

resistant to any single, globalized definition.”<sup>2</sup> Its radically trans-disciplinary character might be added as further distinctive trait, for neither ideas nor the minds of men and women who operate them, stop according to borders set up by academic disciplines but constantly transgress them. “[C]ontributions to the field of intellectual history”, writes Riccardo Bavaj in a recent summary quite to the point, “have been made by a wide array of scholars – these hailing from different national traditions, grounded in varying academic subjects, and employing diverse methodological approaches.”<sup>3</sup> The contributions to this volume are no exception. Contributors come from Germany and Austria, from Poland, Italy and France, from Mexico and the US, their disciplinary backgrounds reach from literary studies to sociology, from philosophy to anthropology, from African Studies to history.<sup>4</sup> In his piece on intellectual history, Bavaj rightly deplores that “communication between these various scholars has often proven rather limited.”<sup>5</sup> This volume, and the conference from which it sprang, are efforts of boosting such communication. It looks for the common ground on which such inter- and cross-disciplinary dialogue can flourish. To this end it might be useful to think about the basic interests underlying any approach to intellectual history. In connection with reflecting upon the particularities of an Africa-centered intellectual history, it might as well serve as an introduction into this book.

In 1985, Quentin Skinner gave a very short answer to the question: *What is intellectual history?* It simply is “the study of past thoughts.” There was, of course, more to his answer. The extended version of his argument ran as follows:

The study of the great religious and philosophical systems of the past; the study of ordinary people’s beliefs about heaven and earth, past and future,

2 Peter E. Gordon: What is Intellectual History? A Frankly Partisan Introduction to a Frequently Misunderstood Field. In: *The Harvard Colloquium for Intellectual History*, Spring 2012. <http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/harvardcolloquium/pages/what-intellectual-history> (accessed 13.02.2015).

3 Riccardo Bavaj: Intellectual History, Version: 1.0. In: *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 13.09.2010, pp. 1–19, here p. 3. [http://docupedia.de/zg/Intellectual\\_History](http://docupedia.de/zg/Intellectual_History) (accessed 13.02.2015).

4 Several African scholars selected by the organizers could not attend the conference due to either lacking funds or petty Visa regulations. Unfortunately, those actually attending failed to submit their papers in time.

5 Bavaj: *Intellectual History*, p. 3.

metaphysics and science; the examination of our ancestors' attitudes towards youth and age, war and peace, love and hate, cabbages and kings; the uncovering of their prejudices about what one ought to eat, how one ought to dress, whom one ought to admire; the analysis of their assumptions about health and illness, good and evil, morals and politics, birth, copulation and death – all these and a vast range of kindred topics fall within the capacious orbit of intellectual history. For they are all instances of the general subject matter that preoccupies intellectual historians above all: the study of past thoughts.<sup>6</sup>

Studying the past is, of course, something done in the present. It accordingly requires a (self-)critical and reflective stance on behalf of intellectual historians. Skinner distinguished three basically different sorts of doing intellectual history which lend themselves to structuring this introduction: (1) a concentration on what are considerably “unit ideas” or “key terms”; (2) “singling out those texts which have been most influential in shaping our western political tradition and offering as careful as possible an account of how they are put together.” This prefigures the making of a classical canon, creating “classic thinkers”; (3) a “focus [...] on the entire social and political vocabularies of given historical periods.”<sup>7</sup> In practice, these orientations may well interfere with each other.

### Key Terms and Classic Thinkers

Concentrating on key terms has got a somewhat bad reputation in mainstream historical profession. This is due to the idealist bias that marked many works written in the vein of German *Geistesgeschichte* or American *History of Ideas*, often passing over the particular contexts in which the ideas in question were operating, as well as eliding the actual women and men who handled them. There cannot be any doubt, however, that writing the history of certain ideas and terms contextualized has a lot to offer. Reinhart Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte* makes this amply clear.<sup>8</sup> More recently, there emerged a new

6 Quentin Skinner: What is Intellectual History? In: *History Today* 35,10 (1985). <http://www.historytoday.com/stefan-collini/what-intellectual-history> (accessed 11.02.2015).

7 Ibid.

8 Reinhart Koselleck: *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1989, pp.114–125; Georg C. Iggers: *Geschichtswissenschaft im 20. Jahrhundert: Ein kritischer Überblick im internationalen Zusammenhang*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2007, pp.101–110, 121–144.

interest in the critical reading of human rights and development discourses, which seems important with regard to African intellectual history.<sup>9</sup> Debates about development, human rights or democracy are discussed all over the world, in media and academia, though often abstracted to a ‘global’ level which is, in fact, more often than not just another way of hiding a Western Eurocentric point of view. A decade ago Frederick Cooper convincingly pointed to the shortcomings of the term “globalization” as an “analytical category”, and contrasted it with its success as a “native category”.<sup>10</sup> This differentiation between “native” meaning (according to particular contexts and identity politics) and “analytical” meaning (striving for understanding and explanation of a particular phenomenon) is crucial whenever ideology and different world views are on the agenda. The debates about what is called ‘global affairs’ are carried out within particular ideological frames – discussing certain key ideas in certain ways, setting the limits of what is allowed to be said and thought, and ignoring or marginalizing those who question the status quo.

A lot can be gained by concentrating on both terms and the varying contexts and ways in which they are debated – by African and Western intellectuals alike. The same is true for a whole variety of frequently debated ideas and terms, some of which are explicitly addressed in contributions to this volume (such as, for instance, ‘state’ or ‘art’), but it applies to even more seminal ideas as well. If it is true that colonialism produced not only particular images of Africa stored in what V. Y. Mudimbe called “the colonial library”, but a whole distorting way of looking at the continent and its people, then it is essential to challenge the basic ideas of ‘Africa’ in general and of ‘African history’ in particular.<sup>11</sup> This is done in several of the pieces that follow. Some

9 Miša Krenčeyová: *Africa and the Rest: Imaginations Beyond a Continent in African Scholarship on Human Rights and Development*. PhD Thesis, University of Vienna 2013, gives a comprehensive account of African voices in the debates; Frederick Cooper: Writing the History of Development. In: *The Journal of Modern European History* 8 (2010), pp. 5–23.

10 Frederick Cooper: *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*. Berkeley: University of California Press 2005, pp. 92–93.

11 V. Y. Mudimbe: *The Invention of Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana UP 1988; cf. Kwame Anthony Appiah: *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. Oxford: Oxford UP 1992; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o: *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*. New York: Basic Civitas 2009; Frederick Cooper: *Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 2014.



address the structures of knowledge production and distribution explicitly, while others treat them implicitly. In some contributions the very relevance of racism comes to the fore. The inherent ambivalence of the matter of ‘race’ in debates on Africa is due to the formative nature of racial discourse – formative, that is, in the ways we not only represent but perceive the world and its people. Colonialism and Afro-European interactions were crucially important in establishing and shaping the conceptual frames of perception and representation of Africa. Hence, the importance ascribed to “colonial racism” by critical African thinkers from very early on.<sup>12</sup>

By establishing certain individual thinkers as paramount and treating them as classics, one must be careful not to get trapped into writing the history of ‘big men’ (or ‘big women’) but to embed the ‘classic thinkers’ properly in time, space and culture. When Quentin Skinner characterized intellectual history in the sense of treating “those texts which have been most influential in shaping our *western* political tradition”,<sup>13</sup> he reveals another point which is crucial from an African perspective: Intellectual history is a field still primarily concerned with Western thought. This invites Eurocentric biases almost inevitably. The work of a great British historian might serve as an appropriate example. When “thinking the twentieth century” or reflecting upon “the forgotten twentieth century” in terms of intellectual history, Tony Judt never bothers to mention any African writers of renown (nor any from Asia).<sup>14</sup> Why? Because being a historian of Europe, no matter how critically minded in intent, still means not being forced to look across the borders of the West. Indeed, Judt looked East but not farther than to Eastern Europe. Such blindness

12 This connection was made in print repeatedly. For early instances see Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford: *Ethiopia Unbound: Studies in Race Emancipation*. London: Cass 1969 [1911]; George Padmore: *How Britain Rules Africa*. New York: Negro Universities Press 1969 [1936]; Aimée Césaire: *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review 2000 [1955]; Albert Memmi: *Portrait du colonisé précédé du Portrait du colonisateur*. Paris: Buchet-Chastel 1957. When Frantz Fanon launched his fierce critique on colonialism since the 1950s he was no lonely voice at all; see Frantz Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove 1967 [1952]; id.: *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove 2004 [1961].

13 Skinner: *Intellectual History*, my emphasis.

14 Tony Judt: *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*. New York: Penguin 2008; Tony Judt, with Timothy Snyder: *Thinking the Twentieth Century*. New York: Penguin 2012.

has much to do with imperial and colonial pasts forgotten or, at least, not sufficiently reflected.

Bringing Africa into the picture is as essential as decolonizing intellectual history in general, as Nancy Hunt reminded us recently.<sup>15</sup> And it is a good idea to start that project with a fresh look at African intellectual protagonists and key ideas advanced by them,<sup>16</sup> for Tony Judt is right on principle when proclaiming

The twentieth century was the century of the intellectual: [... of] men and women [...] who applied themselves to debating and influencing public opinion and policy. The intellectual was by definition committed – ‘engaged’: usually to an ideal, a dogma, a project.<sup>17</sup>

African history is by no means short on people who match that definition. Some of them appear in the following pages.

### Discourses and Issues

In the wake of the linguistic and cultural turns in the human sciences, academic culture changed markedly. Positivist positions came under heavy critique, and appropriately so, while the new emphasis on culture and representation, performance and expression, gave rise to prominence to a soon influential category: ‘discourse’. Effectively introduced by French philosopher-historian Michel Foucault to grasp several distinctive and problematic characteristics of modernity (from madness and science to sexuality, from sanitation to punishment), ‘discourse’ was to become ubiquitously used.<sup>18</sup> With Palestinian literary scholar Edward Said who combined some of Foucault’s ideas with Antonio Gramsci’s concept of ‘hegemony’, discourse analysis reached out onto non-European spaces.<sup>19</sup> Its novelty was twofold.

15 Nancy Rose Hunt: *The Affective, the Intellectual, and Gender History*. In: *Journal of African History* 55,3 (2014), pp. 331–345, here p. 339.

16 Kwame Anthony Appiah has done exactly this in his recent book on one of the founding fathers of Pan-Africanism, W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963), the great African American historian: *Lines of Descent: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Emergence of Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard UP 2014.

17 Tony Judt: *Reappraisals*, p. 13.

18 Cf. Michel Foucault: *L’ordre du discours*. Paris: Gallimard 1972. On Foucault’s life and work see Didier Eribon: *Michel Foucault (1926–1984)*. Paris: Flammarion 1989. From a historian’s perspective see Peter Burke: *What is Cultural History?* Cambridge: Polity 2008, pp. 53–58.

19 Edward Said: *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. London: Penguin 1995 [1978].

First, *Orientalism* was markedly theoretical in intent – a characteristic that (unfortunately) informs many of the postcolonial studies which take Said's book for their charter –, often at the expense of empirical and historical accuracy. Secondly, in its anti-colonial stance it gave voice to an outspoken partisan approach. In both respects the axis of Gramsci-Foucault-Said informed (and informs) the works of some influential African authors such as V.Y. Mudimbe or, more recently, Achille Mbembe who tend very much, at least in my reading of their works, to fall prey to naïve idealism.<sup>20</sup> It seems, therefore, reasonable to recognize that there are less idealized and less generalizing understandings of 'discourse' available as well, which give due credit to concrete empirical and particular historical contexts.<sup>21</sup> According to J. G. A. Pocock, the focus on

'discourse' – meaning 'speech', 'literature' and public utterance in general [...] enables one to write the history of an intellectual activity as a history of actions performed by human beings in a variety of circumstances; actions which have affected other human beings, and have affected the circumstances in which they were performed (if only by making it possible to talk and argue about these circumstances).<sup>22</sup>

It follows that discursive ideas are to be studied in their particular contexts. If we ask, then, which discourse or what 'discursive formations' shaped the long 20<sup>th</sup> century, it will be easily understood that from an African perspective colonialism looms large. In the course of several centuries Africa was economically integrated into an emerging capitalist world market on uneven grounds. Over time, she evolved into a sole producer of mineral, agricultural and

20 Mudimbe: *Invention of Africa*; Achille Mbembe: *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press 2001; id.: *Critique de la raison nègre*. Paris: Éditions la Découverte 2013.

21 And there is a critical as well as empirically and historically informed tradition of African historiography that still awaits its rediscovery. It would be a good idea to read again the pioneers of African history – those who accomplished making it into an academic subject, for they said many things that foreshadowed the 'anti-orientalist' critique of later decades, and some things they said much better; see Arno Sonderegger: *Nachbetrachtung zur Kolonialgeschichte und Historiographie Afrikas*. In: Id. / Ingeborg Grau / Birgit Englert (eds): *Afrika im 20. Jahrhundert: Geschichte und Gesellschaft*. Vienna: Promedia 2011, pp. 228–254, here pp. 231–237; Jean-François Bayart: *Les études postcoloniales: un carnaval académique*. Paris: Karthala 2010.

22 J.G.A. Pocock: What is Intellectual History? In: *History Today* 35,10 (1985). <http://www.historytoday.com/stefan-collini/what-intellectual-history> (accessed 11.02.2015).

human resources – producing ‘products’, ‘slaves’ and ‘cash crops’, all destined to markets outside the continent, and operating to the benefit of capitalist entrepreneurs. At least in macroeconomic terms, there is no doubt that in the long run Africa and the majority of Africans did not benefit from those various forms of uneven trade but suffered from severe exploitation.<sup>23</sup> According to the Guyanese historian of Africa, Walter Rodney, Europe did actively underdevelop Africa (and other parts of the world) in the course of its capitalist-imperialist expansion that strove for both economic and political hegemony. Starting with the transatlantic slave-trade, “colonialism” changed its outward appearance since the early modern era but persisted over time being “a system which functioned well in the interests of the metropole”, by means of “exploitation and oppression”, operating as “a one-armed bandit”.<sup>24</sup>

Other scholars, African and Western alike, have not professed to this extreme moralistic point of view and offered a more balanced evaluation of the colonial experience, but still, all the serious ones share Adu Boahen’s conclusion that “quite clearly the debit side [of colonialism] far outweighs the credit side.”<sup>25</sup> The argument of a long-term process of underdeveloping Africa, as proposed by Rodney and, shed off its moralist twist, confirmed by Immanuel Wallerstein’s narrative of *the modern world-system’s* development, understands ‘colonialism’

23 Important contributions to set the record straight came from African scholars. For macro-level interpretations see Samir Amin: *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review 1976 [1973]; id.: *Maldevelopment: Anatomy of a Global Failure*. Cape Town: Pambazuka 2011. The historical research on regional levels since the 1950s is far too numerous to be listed here in detail, as are the contributions of African historians. Kenneth O. Dike and Jacob A. F. Ajayi from Nigeria, Adu Boahen from Ghana, Bethwell A. Ogot from Kenya, Joseph Ki-Zerbo from Burkina Faso, and many other African historians were public figures and would be well worth the attention by intellectual historians of Africa. So far they have been ignored almost completely by *Postcolonial Studies*, most probably because of their dominant focus on left-wing intellectuals. Cf. Robert J. C. Young: *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. Malden: Blackwell 2001.

24 Walter Rodney: *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Abuja: Panaf 2009 [1973], p. 246–247.

25 A. Adu Boahen: *African Perspectives on Colonialism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 1987, p. 108. The last chapter of this small book is entirely devoted to a balanced discussion of the “colonial impact” on Africa, interpreted through the liberal lens of this Ghanaian historian. Cf. Stephen Ellis: *Season of Rains: Africa in the World*. London: Hurst 2011; Frederick Cooper: *Africa in the World*, pp. 90–101.

*à la longue durée* and gives primacy to economic over political factors, while emphasizing the importance of both.<sup>26</sup> Politics, in this view, develops according to economic changes, and imperialism – i.e. the establishment of colonial empires and of more informal spheres of imperial influence – is both the ideological and praxeological corollary to capitalism.

Against this understanding of colonialism in the long run, one can (and must) distinguish a narrower definition. It has become quite common among colonial historians and historians of Africa to identify colonialism with formalized foreign rule. Understood that way – as colonial rule situated within the formal imperial frame of ‘colonial empires’ –, colonialism stretched out over almost all of Africa only at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century, and came to an end in several waves of decolonization already some decades later. Seen in that perspective, African experience of colonial rule was (apart from a few coastal bridgeheads) short-lived. This fact led (and leads) some to consider its impact superficial, marginal and largely irrelevant. Such a view, very widespread in media and policy discourses about Africa (as well as in parts of academic research on Africa that are historically ignorant, *geschichtsvergessen*), is basically wrong – misled, and misleading in consequence.<sup>27</sup> The effects of foreign colonial domination on Africa are strikingly relevant. It is well to remember that decolonization was not complete – not even in political terms, for the sovereignty of African post-colonial states remains precarious, much less in the economic spheres of world capitalism. To underline this fact, the title of this book emphatically speaks of colonial *and neo-colonial* worlds, using a term that fell into disrepute in some corners long ago. Apart from those who ignore the colonial legacies on principle, some serious historians of Africa chose to confine ‘neo-colonial’ on French policies

26 A short summary of and theoretical reflection on his multi-volume opus *The Modern World-System* can be found in Immanuel Wallerstein: *Historical Capitalism with Capitalist Civilization*. London: Verso 2011.

27 For a convincing critique along those lines targeting at political science approaches in particular, see Patrick Chabal: *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*. London: Zed 2009. For critical accounts on the colonial impact on African societies and, in particular, on postcolonial politics by African scholars, see Mahmood Mamdani: *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. London: Currey 1996; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o: The Myth of ‘Tribe in African Politics. In: *Transition* 101 (2009), pp. 16–23.

towards Africa – meaning directly interventionist policies (in diplomatic, financial as well as military senses) by a European state with past formal colonial relationship to some African countries. This is, of course, not the way ‘neo-colonial’ is understood in the context of this book. And it does not correspond to the way “neo-colonialism” was originally conceived by Kwame Nkrumah:

The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.<sup>28</sup>

This visionary of Pan-African unity had a sophisticated understanding of ‘outside’, already dissolving the simple dichotomies of Black and White, Africa and Europe, and emphasizing their entanglement:

Under neocolonialism, the economic systems and political policies of independent territories are managed and manipulated from outside, by international monopoly finance capital in league with the indigenous bourgeoisie.<sup>29</sup>

As with the continuing impact of the legacies of formal colonialism, it is well to remember, too, that the establishment of full-fledged colonial empires in Africa was preceded by several centuries of unequal Afro-European relations and interactions.<sup>30</sup> Throughout that history, Africans had a say in the course of events and often spoke out against the currents. For a long time they have been ignored in their originality or treated as only marginally relevant by hegemonic Western discourse. It is time to challenge this state of affairs, for African thinkers of the twentieth century have had a lot to say about the nature and causes of global inequality – and they still do. If we want to come to a more globally informed perspective on colonial and neo-colonial worlds, we should start listening to what Africa and Africans have to say.

28 Kwame Nkrumah: *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. London: Panaf 1971 [1965], p. ix.

29 Kwame Nkrumah: *Revolutionary Path*. London: Panaf 1973, p. 313.

30 Andreas Eckert / Ingeborg Grau / Arno Sonderegger (eds): *Afrika 1500–1900: Geschichte und Gesellschaft*. Vienna: Promedia 2010.