PAST AND PRESENT: SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA IN EUROPEAN PERCEPTION

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The aim of this article is to look at the complexity of the condition of past and present sub-Saharan Africa, as it is seen from the perspective of Europeans. By pointing to the contemporary, historical, social, anthropological and political studies on Africa, there is an attempt to overcome two widespread clichés on Africa that are being perpetuated, particularly by the media, opinion makers and to a certain extent through the public education system.

The crucial question raised here is whether an ordinary inhabitant of the Western World can understand today's sub-Saharan Africa that is characterized by ongoing poverty, pandemic diseases, armed conflicts, political mismanagement, but also by Africa's current endeavour to resolve all these predicaments by adopting a vision of a rebirth of Africa: the African Renaissance.

The first cliché is embedded in the so-called ethnographic present through which the audience is presented with a **reified**, rigid, motionless image of 'traditional' Africa, which is non-existent.[1] The second cliché lies in the concept of Dark Africa (French *Afrique Noire*) and her alleged irrationality being heavily perpetuated in public.

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[1] Ethnographic present is the convention in anthropology of writing about a culture in the present tense regardless of the distance in time from the actual act of observation or historical existence. The practice was particularly common in early American anthropology, where authors were keen to describe the cultures of native American groups whose historical way of life had vanished before the time of observation and was being reconstructed from interviews and documents.

What kind of information does the European audience and readership receive about Africa?

The key information is that Africa is in crisis. The manifestation of the crisis equals the synthesis of economic, political, social and cultural problems. Chabal (1996, 30 - 36) identifies four distinct factors of the crisis:

1) An acute economic crisis that is accompanied by the collapse of domestic economies of most African countries. He claims that African economies today are in a worse state than they were at the time of independence. What is commonly stressed is the dependence of Africa on foreign aid, imports, and loans. Foreign debt was triggered by the rise in oil prices during the world economic crisis in the 1970s. African politicians were forced to borrow abroad: however, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were willing to aid the development of African countries only where there was evidence that they were being governed democratically, that is through a multi-party system. The taken-for-granted remedies coming out of the rich West usually contain simplified prescriptions for recovery, through the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. There are many ready-made explanations about the causes of the economic failure that are biased or even racist in referring to 'innate economic inability' of Africans (Chabal 1996: 30).

2) The second manifestation of African crisis lies in a growing political instability and rampant violent conflicts. Two thirds of the emergent independent African nation-states have undergone or are currently undergoing serious conflicts that are mostly explained simplistically as tribal violence and 'natural' hostility among African 'tribes'. Violence plays a central role in the history of sub-Saharan Africa, even though the proportion of human victims is relatively small compared with violent conflicts in Europe and Asia.

3) The third aspect deals with the alleged marginalization of the African economy on the world market accompanied by Africa's increasing political irrelevance on the world stage after the end of the bipolar world. However, Bayart does not share Chabal's opinion when pointing out many forms of Africa's insertion into the world system. He proposes that Africa's political crisis is not a consequence of colonization only but that it is symptomatic of a historical line of continuity, what he calls a practice of extraversion (Bayart 2000: 237). Within this theory the economic marginalization of Africa is of older dynamics generated by its insertion into the world economy. Thus he disputes the contemporary widespread assertion that Africa south of the Sahara, already weakened by globalization, is being marginalized economically. He claims that Africa has been inserted in the

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international system over the *longue durée*, through slavery, colonialism, Christian coversion, the penetration of capitalist economies and the political confrontations generated by decolonization as well as by material practices – prominently by clothing. Africa is also part of the world system through many notorious activities such as trickery, smuggling, trafficing narcotics and so on (ibid, 251).

4) Finally, Chabal poses the so-called re-traditionalization of African societies. Due to the identity politics that is spreading in Africa as fast as in the West, the emphasis is placed on the comeback of traditions such as manifestations of sorcery and witchcraft, occult, magic or polygamy. Chabal argues that there is a revival of African religion, and a greater use (or, as I would rather claim, at least an attempted use) of local languages (Chabal 1996: 33). It goes without saying that these phenomena are totally incomprehensible for European observers, and thus they serve as another proof of Africa´s failure to modernize: that is to say, such practices are perceived (utterly in line with the pseudo-Darwinist theory of social evolutionism) as a hindrance to progress. Bayart, however, argues that this current fashion towards nativism in the guise of the African Renaissance is a form of rejection of Western influence, but that it can nevertheless be a mode of another appropriation (Bayart 2000: 265). He claims that there is every reason to assume that the desire for the West will remain substantial in the future development of Africa.

The statement that Africa is in crisis appears indisputable. The thing is, however, how is this multifaceted crisis interpreted and perceived by Europeans. At present there are two contradictory attitudes prevalent among the Western public: one negative and the other positive.

1) The negative attitude, characterized by a gloomy stance, constitutes the most widespread view. Its core is the ´new barbarism´, or primordial racism (Chabal 1997). African traditions are seen as obstacles to the development of the continent. This view derives from the theory of social Darwinism according to which all humankind is to evolve from savagery via backwardness to the highest form, modernity. The most problematic stage is that of backwardness as it was viewed as an inherent characteristic of every race, as a certain genetic insufficiency. I argue that the prevalent assessment of Africa is under the sway of the Victorian school of thought. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of a pseudo-scientific concept of racism and increasingly negative European stereotypes of non-European peoples, as well as a marked rise in European cultural arrogance, and, ultimately, the eclipse of universalist Enlightenment ideas that had informed the movement to

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end the Atlantic slavery (Crais 2002:15). The factors of cultural arrogance, racial superiority and economic greed helped spur colonial expansion in Africa and in many other areas of the non-Western world. What is more, these dangerous theories were not even erased after the Holocaust. Why is that so? Do we really need Africa as a place of barbarity and irrationality to assure ourselves about our own rationality and modernity?

2) The positive attitude stems from the belief in economic and political liberalization. The argument is in favour of liberalism, which is essential for Africa´development is the transition to an intrinsic, genuine democracy and free market – these are connected vessels. There is a deeply-rooted belief that democracy will eventually result in development. However, the Western interpretation of modernity which is the embodiment of an economically active society is not compatible with African cultural chahracteristics. The West, except for Africanists and some other scholars who speak about its dynamic nature, hybridity and change, still operates within a simplified dichotomy between tradition and modernity. In short, the academic accounts are out of reach of the public that are overwhelmingly indoctrinated with the schematic interpretations on what is going on in Africa.

It is crystal clear that neither Afro-pessimism nor Afro-optimism offers a safisfactory interpretation as both approaches are static and schematic and are built on faulty premises. The core of the problem is the assessment of development from the unilinear historical perspective, namely the implicit belief in a definite path and direction of human evolution which everything human-made must follow (Skalník 2000). Political culture in Africa differs substantially from the Western liberal model. It is a heteregenous mixture of authoritarian and democratic principles from both precolonial and colonial Africa. Its main feature is communalism (the community is more important than the individual). The prevalence of the one-party system in Africa shows that immature, mostly uneducated or illiterate African voters are not familiar with the phenomenon of opposition (Skalník 2004:18).

Liberal researchers in Africa would like to present a way out: Europocentrist prescriptions of economic growth together with democratization will result in a new Africa that will already be mature, able to develop like Europe, at least Central and Eastern Europe, that is towards the formal market economy, a weaker state and civic society. The figures on Africa from the nineties, however, speak a different language. Examples from Ghana, Kenya or Zambia illustrate how the current ideology of structural adjustment, economic liberalization and multipartyism has not led to the advent of democracy and

prosperity in Africa. Instead, it has turned out that the state in Africa is controlled by *belly politics* (Bayart 2000), *clientelism* leads to the state that falsifies its acts (Hibou 1997) and the state is in fact *neopatrimonial* (Chabal 1999), namely the private property of new African elites that have appropriated a formally independent state. The neopatrimonial system is, according to Chabal, incapable of bringing about any sustained economic growth, without which there can be no development. In short, there is a paradoxical outcome: all the good intentions of the structural adjustment reform seemed to have failed. The current orthodoxy on the correlation between democratization and development is very likely to end up in a blind alley as well.

The interpretation of African crisis
"The notion that it is difficult to understand the politics of postcolonial Black Africa is hard to escape. Indeed, the accounts given of events taking place there point to a situation in which journalists and academics alike seem at a loss to interpret what is happening. Optimism is followed by despair. Explanations are offered only to be discarded or retracted. Forecasts are quickly invalidated or overtaken by events which were not anticipated. Of course, events in Africa are not the only ones which we (Western Europeans) find difficult to explain. Much that is happening today in Eastern Europe also appears largely to escape our understanding. Indeed, the parallel with Eastern Europe is instructive; for it helps us recognize why explaining the politics of the "other" is such an eminently subjective activity and why we so often fail to see that it is"
(Chabal 1996:29).

The interpretation of African postcolonial situation is reflected in what Chabal (1996: 45 – 47) calls the politics of the mirror, that is within European thought locked in binary oppositions. Thus Africa is a counterpoint of our history: backward vs advanced, rational vs irrational. Either there is democracy or authoritarianism. The problem is that sometimes the outside observers fail to understand African social reality where apparent contradictions are not so contradictory. For Europeans, Africa is predominantly a place of mystery and exoticism. Whatever happens in Africa today is interpreted as obscure, irrational and incomprehensible (Chabal 1997). Assessments are either racist or paternalistic. This is, as has already been stated, a reductionist view, a legacy of deeply embedded racism. The African crisis can be explained. Chabal claims that there is nothing special or mysterious about contemporary Africa. Nothing that cannot be understood or explained if we develop the means to look at Africa from a more critical and historical analytical perspective. The fact that modernization of Africa has not resulted in development is according to Chabal the result of the combination of three processes:

1) The collapse of the patrimonial state and the advent of neopatrimonialism which is the cause of the majority of contemporary problems in Africa, manifesting itself in the disorder and governmental and administrative inefficiency.
2) The lack of political accountability in postcolonial Africa characterized by the redistribution of resources by clients.
3) The political instrumentalization of disorder within which political actors in Africa seek to maximize their returns on the state of disorder (Chabal 1997).

In a broader perspective, what lies behind the African crisis is a malign combination of economic collapse, demographic growth, mismanagement, the legacy of European colonialism and ethnic cleavages. However, many commentators use cultural or racial stereotypes, primordial concepts or sentimental interpretations of democracy. According to them, Africa is in crisis because of her backwardness, primitiveness, laziness of Africans, irrationality and barbarity, and because Africa has not been able to adopt the rules put forward by the West. These racist views support popular conceptions of the third world according to which the people living in the poor countries are simply lacking in intellectual ability. Others attribute their backwardness to cultural beliefs and institutions. Others see 'traditional', 'pre-modern' social structures as the problem: aid from the developed world it is considered a waste of resources, because corrupt rulers will simply pocket it or use it inefficiently. Such clichés about immutability of Africa attempt to deny the fact that Africa **has** changed since independence although not alongside the linear prescriptions of the modernization theory. Is there a way out? To escape those reductionist views, any plausible, seriously-minded account on Africa must combine both emic and etic perspectives. In today's situation it particularly means to analyse Africa without Europocentrist cliches. The common dictionary of African politics contains external 'Western' terms like election, democracy, political party, political pluralism but it is in Africa where the genuine meaning of the concepts is formed.

Misapprehension of the West
The current media representation of Africa falls into a double trap. It either focuses on aspects of curiosity and mystery that have been part and parcel of Africa's culture groups until today and can therefore provide the audiences in the West with a false dichotomy between the traditional and modern worlds, or they report on variable and manifold disasters happening in Africa. Both views are flawed for at least one reason: they are schematic, making use of extremes. The audience fails to apprehend the ambivalence, the differentiation and the dynamism of African social reality as well as the dynamics of the relationship

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between Africa and the rest of the world. Such accounts simply overshadow the facts that Africa has never stopped exchanging both ideas and goods with Europe, Asia and later with the Americas. They also tend to contest the fact that colonization included many variable factors and a vast variety of historical situations that resulted in the variety of reactions of African societies to acts of colonization. Colonial occupation required the active intermediation of a whole range of social categories (Bayart 2000: 261). This is not to deny what colonial rule meant for Africans, or how radically their societies changed under its yoke. Rather, this is to note that such literature does not fully reflect the depth of socio-cultural changes Africa has been undergoing. On the contrary, it coins a mechanical and schematic picture of the alleged one-way indiscernible subordination of African societies. It should be emphasized that though colonialism was firstly forced upon Africans, many Africans appropriated the world in which they had to survive. Gradually they adopted new styles of life quite willingly, no matter how ambivalently. The 'end result' of this complexity is hybridization combined with genuine creativity (Bayart 2000: 250). It goes without saying that Africans are actors in their own history, ready to adapt to external constraints and conditions. Any attempt to deny their active share is to dispute their history.

The European view of 'Negro' Africa was originally formed during the era of the slave trade and related particularly to the coast of West Africa. For many Europeans, 'Negro' was not fully human, the African inhabitants were regarded as mere background, 'part of the local fauna.' The late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries saw an unprecedented flowering of scientific interest. Both geographical and biological enquiries were in fashion. By gaining more knowledge about the African continent, explorers helped to create a favourable atmosphere for Europe's 'new imperialism'. By 1880 men like Bruce, Mungo Park, Clapperton, Livingston, Speke, Burton or Stanley had solved all the big geographical mysteries. The Victorians had very enquiring minds that could be satisfied in the interior of Africa, which held most of the mysteries left in the world after the exploration of the Americas, Australia and much of Asia. Moreover, Victorians loved heroes: politicians, scientists and exlorers, missionaries fulfilled their prescribed roles. All these helped create an image which was to influence the opinions of millions of people in the West for a long time. The message that was perpetuated through travel books, scientific findings, and ordinary accounts concerned the darkness of Africa: Africa as a place of savagery and brutality where public executions, witchcraft, sorcery and tortures such as chopping off the hand of a thief informed ordinary Europeans that Africa lagged behind. Missionaries, on the other hand, drew their own picture of Africa. Without disputing a certain humanitarian interest in the form of missionary societies, in their perspectives Africans were hopeless children

who needed to be advised and accompanied on their way to progress. The missionary societies had very effective propaganda machines and the picture they drew of Africa gained very wide acceptance.

In the nineteenth century an enormous technological gap appeared between European and African civilizations. The uneven and asymmetrical character of the relations between Africa and Europe accentuated from the 1870s onwards and culminated in the military occupation of the continent (Bayart 2000: 218). Africa was once again coming to seem an El Dorado and it proved true (e.g. with the discovery of diamonds at Kimberley or gold in Witwatersrand in South Africa). The possibilities seemed unlimited as behind it all stood the new Victorian technology, the steam ship, telegraph, and above all, the railway, which for the first time appeared to promise the real opening up of the interior of Africa. Many of the Europeans who undertook civilization and adventure missions, grew immensely rich in Africa. Psychologically, the two cultures moved very far apart. To Europeans, technological advance became almost a badge of civilization. For Africans, on the other hand, civilization was not a matter of technological development, but of social responsibility. Possessing things meant nothing to them, they did not judge the degree of civilization by the number of things they could own.

Political and economic domination was reinforced by the dissemination of values and institutions designed to promote acceptance, by the colonized, of their place in the colonial order. The superiority of European culture was a total superiority: not just one of technology and productive systems, but also of ideas and values. The spiritual superiority of European culture over all forms of indigenous culture remained unquestioned. Schools run by missions were the main vehicles for the dissemination of European culture. Further on, the vast literature produced by journalists and academics assured the western readership of the fact that Africa was cut off from the rest of the world and that it is an 'enclave', existing in 'isolation' on account of its deserts, its forests and its alleged primitivness (Bayart 2000: 217). Since then, the next generations of recipients have been regularly offered 'evidence' of this legitimate view: massacres between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994 showing rivers abundant in floating human bodies, child soldiers chopping their enemies' limbs in Sierra Leone, or recent apocalyptic spectacles in the Darfur region.

Another concept whose usage obscures or even precludes an understanding of the African postcolonial condition is 'tribe'. 'This term generally labelled as a colonial invention, was widely used as a device to disaggregate the African population (Skalník 1988: 68). Even though the term tribe has been criticized by many writers as a static, anachronic and inappropriate category, the concept has

proved to be extremely resilient. It is still in use among the general public in the West – especially by the mass media and opinion makers. When using this term, they predominantly refer to cultural curiosities that take place in contemporary 'third world' societies (e.g. tribal village, tribal dancing, female or male circumcision as phenomena linked with tribal life etc.). The term serves as a synonym for 'primitive', 'traditional', 'savage' or 'backward'. Consequently, there is still an assumption on the part of many Europeans, that every African belongs to a tribe. In the eyes of Europeans, such a tribal identity is a key factor in formulating a worldview and as a result, Africa is swayed by insurmountable tribal rivalries and hostilities that manifest themselves in tribal, or ethnic clashes and other violent conflicts. The underlying idea is, as Skalník states, that tribal animosities run deep and are based on 'natural' divisions (ibid). They are regarded as ancient and extremely powerful.

The concept of tribe is viewed as an earlier stage in human social evolution. According to this view, people used to belong to tribes, but then they modernized themselves and since then they have been part of nations. The only trouble is that while Europeans live in nations, Africans and other 'less developed people' (or 'underdeveloped', possibly 'developing') are organized into tribes. 'Tribe' is thus an oppositional category to 'nation' that at the same time equals modernity and civilization. General usage of the term tribe is mostly associated with distinct and isolated cultural units that are shown to Europeans through the mass media. Irrespective of widespread criticism of the evolutionist thinking implicit in the 'tribal paradigm'. For many Europeans this is the only image they receive about Africa (obviously apart from intermittent reports on violent conflicts, famine or victims of AIDS). The concept of tribe reappears again because it seems to serve as a useful simplification. Through the prism of tribe, Africa is perceived unchanged through the method of ethnographic present and thus easy to understand in simplistic terms.

The pressing questions why Africa has hitherto failed to develop economically and whether the present democratic agenda will make development more likely can be legitimally approached from different perspectives and by no means can they produce unequivocal answers and/or recipes for Africa's recovery and remedies for her ills. An understanding of the present condition of Africa requires a willingness to employ both emic and etic perspectives. Such accounts, based upon profound analytical theories and solid empirical research are of vital importance since they can serve as a counterbalance to quick, superficial, sensation-seeking, ready-made assessments and images of Africa produced by the public media and other opinion makers. There is nothing mysterious about Africa, nothing that could not be explained. What hinders our comprehension is a mixture of our self-conceit, complacency, contempt and indifference over Africa.

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