

An Embrace of Africa

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In 1956, while working in the summer as a fledgling reporter for the then family-owned *Hartford Courant*, I persuaded the editors to let me write what turned out to be a seven-part series exposing the extent of housing segregation in “liberal” Hartford. When “Where Can a Negro Live?” began to appear, day-after-day, I started to receive hate mail. One particularly memorable postcard urged, “If you like them so much, why not go live there [in Africa].” So I did.

There are many more nuanced reasons why I decided to make the study of Africa a life’s work. A strong exposure to human rights concerns during my undergraduate years at Oberlin College and an introduction during graduate research at Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School of International Affairs about what was and was not changing in the American South (the Hartford interlude occurred between my first and second years at Princeton; the Greensboro sit-ins were yet to occur) obviously also influenced my desire to learn whether or not the impending end of colonial rule in Africa would greatly improve indigenous outcomes in the far continent. Would Africans achieve their rights even before African Americans in the South?

When I finally landed in Africa early in 1959, after four terms as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford and special dispensation to use Rhodes funding to do D. Phil. thesis fieldwork in Africa, I was immediately thrust into heady discussions about how rapidly and how dramatically to decolonize East, Central, and southern Africa. Two anti-Rhodesian and anti-British insurgencies (in Zambia and Malawi) unfolded in real time. So did major political shifts in Tanzania, Kenya, and Zanzibar. I was privileged to know and record the efforts of struggle leaders (including many prison detainees and a few future national presidents) and to pursue live research while also digging deeply into local archives.

For several years, I traveled back and forth from Harvard, where I began researching and teaching in 1961, to African colonies on the cusp of independence. For example, my late wife and I were with Jomo Kenyatta when he emerged from post-Mau Mau detention in Kenya. I wanted to ask him questions about Mau Mau; he insisted on quizzing Joanna about her important research on the diseases of bananas (a critical local commercial crop).

I also came to know segregated Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa well, and to steep myself for purposes of research and advocacy in the work of those who were attempting to free Nelson Mandela and remove the yoke of apartheid.

Later, despite being banned from South Africa for five years and from Rhodesia (before it became Zimbabwe) for eight years, my

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research and teaching at Harvard and then at MIT focused on how best to strengthen African assertions of their own rights and, additionally, on how insiders and outsiders could best contribute to African economic and social growth. What should foreign policymakers do to help the leaders of Africa to foster good indigenous outcomes? Again, with the object of improving outcomes for Africans generally, what were the more effective and responsible choices available in the policy arena for African politicians?

In order to pursue such goals; in order to teach both undergraduate and graduate students about the real Africa in all of its variety and idiosyncratic forms (now forty-nine sub-Saharan African countries), their different indigenous and colonial heritages, different languages and ethnicities, different post-colonial trajectories, different economic growth potentials, and much more; and in order to carry out an expansive social science and historical research agenda, I ended up writing a number of books on an array of relevant subjects, editing more (including both conference collections and two African autobiographies), producing reports on regional or individual country advances, writing four biographies, and attempting through the power of the pen – and with limited success – to encourage the outside world to combat famine in Ethiopia (and now in southern Africa), to urge local audiences to battle creeping authoritarianism in their own countries (e.g., Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Malawi), and to persuade the greater world not to be fooled by the sugar-coating that Afrikaner spokesmen were applying to the curse of apartheid.

Because African politics and development are such vast subjects, and because I was as much interested in its past as its future, my writing and teaching ranged originally from the origins of man and the discovery of Africa to the revolutionary processes that created the new nations of the continent. First at Harvard, where I inaugurated the teaching of African history to large numbers of under-

graduates (a President of Harvard, chancing upon me in the street in front of his house, asked me what I did. When I told him, he exclaimed: “We do that [teach about Africa] here?”) and supervised smaller numbers of graduate students in history and government (while running research projects at the Center for International Affairs – now the Weatherhead Center), and second at MIT, where I taught both the history and political science of emerging Africa, I attempted to explicate the richness and complexity of the African situation so that those of us who were studying modernization or development, patrimonialism, one-party systems, or militarism in politics could strengthen our theoretical appreciation of the African “fit” and African exceptionalism.

Research and writing naturally followed. There was so much to learn and to share. When I wrote *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa* and edited *From Protest to Power in Africa*, early books, I sought to show how Africans were reclaiming their authenticity, sometimes through militant and chiliastic means. *Suffer the Future: Policy Choices in South Africa* examined how apartheid worked and what to do about it. *Ending Autocracy, Enabling Democracy: the Tribulations of Southern Africa* analyzed the freedom struggle from Cape Town to Lusaka. Volumes such as the edited collections *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences*; *On Governance*; *China into Africa*; and *Corruption, World Security, and Global Order* were attempts to discuss many of the larger issues bedeviling African and other developing world states as they matured in the twenty-first century. More recently, *Africa Emerges: Consummate Challenges, Abundant Opportunities and Transformative Political Leadership: Making a Difference in the Developing World* explored African aspirations and how to achieve better governance and sustainable progress. The Index of African Governance, which I created to quantify the results of African methods of governing themselves, showed which of the sub-Saharan nations had succeeded well and which had not. (Along the way, I also wrote about similarities and structural differences in Haiti, Burma, Sri Lanka, Cyprus, and Israel/Palestine, and organized collective volumes on truth commissions, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and conflict prevention.)

During the academic year 2015–2016, I was privileged to chair the Academy’s Africa Study Group. The objectives of the discussion group were to engage the Academy with Africa, to explore key topics of interest to its members (drawn as they largely and inevitably were from the ranks of Massachusetts-based medical, educational, scientific, and social scientific faculties, as well as the corporate community), and to begin to discover how the Academy could best partner with the new Africa. Since I have spent the better part of an adult lifetime encouraging and enabling such partnerships, and advocating for and with the peoples of Africa, the focus on Africa’s needs drew on decades of familiarity willingly shared.

Without even attempting to summarize what we learned, it is evident that sub-Saharan Africa’s contemporary population explosion (Nigeria will become the third largest nation on the planet, Tanzania the fifth), and what those hugely swelling numbers will mean for urbanization, educational opportunity, and health outcomes, overshadows the equally serious deleterious shifts that will flow from the impact of global warming on Africa’s diminishing ability to feed itself. Electrical generating capacities, already minuscule, and insufficient roads, rails, and harbors are further hindrances to necessary growth and improved living standards. To cope effectively with these and other pressing concerns, sub-Saharan Africa’s peoples cry out for more skillful leadership and fair-minded governance (including reduced corruption and attention to the rule of law).

These are the kinds of problems on which I have been working for twenty years, and in many respects for fifty or so years. Laying out the various well-researched alternative policy paths – the available choices for Africa – is what we must continue to do if Africans are to prosper, if the African middle class is to be enabled to exert a greater influence than before on its own benevolent political and social outcomes, and if Africans, like Asians, are to achieve a thoroughgoing demographic dividend for themselves and for the continent.

Africa has never been an easy collection of countries to study. But the purposes for which I first ventured to the far continent still drive my research and my writing today. There is much still to learn from Africa, and to share with students, colleagues, the Academy, and the public at large.

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