

PRAGMATISM, OPPORTUNISM, AND PROFESSIONAL AFRICAN HISTORY: a review of C. FYFE (Ed.) African Studies Since 1945 — a tribute to Basil Davidson. London: Longman, 1976.

Now that the field of African studies has come of age, it is proper that tribute should be paid to its pioneers. For this reason, on 8 November 1974, a group of academicians assembled at the University of Edinburgh's Centre of African Studies for a two day seminar to discuss how the field of African Studies has changed since the end of the Second World War. The seminar was held in honour of Basil Davidson, a liberal "activist" and scholar of African affairs on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday. Not many African professionals attended the seminar. "Hence it turned out (and why not?) to be largely a tribute paid by British (Africanist) scholars to a distinguished British scholar."¹

Davidson's interest in Africa was roused by the nationalist awakening, an interest he shared with such other sympathizers as Thomas Hodgkin. Soon this interest turned into a search for the hitherto dominant "Hegelian idea — of the essentially, unknowable, unhistorical, undeveloping, tradition bound, character of African societies — built into the structure of racist ideologies" which expressed itself "at both an academic and a popular level".² It is a quest which witnessed the publication of such important works intended to glorify the African past as *Old Africa Rediscovered*.³

Davidson is of the opinion that the contempt with which Africans and their past have been treated is a product of the colonial encounter. At the beginning of the Vasco da Gama era, it seems, Africans were treated by Europeans with respect. This constituted a period of partnership which came to an end with the scramble for Africa. This was a period of just under four centuries!⁴ Until the end of the Iron Age, too, Basil Davidson maintains that Africa was ahead of other continents in terms of development. As regards technological transformation, however, there Africa remained trapped until the coming of the colonial encounter!⁵ Like China which was to be scientifically and technologically ahead of the rest of the world for most of the Sung period, Africa seems to have been caught up in what has been termed the "high level technological trap". This allowed other continents to catch up with and eventually to outstrip Africa, as also was to be the case with China!⁶

The Edinburgh seminar was held in honour of Basil Davidson's contribution to the study of African affairs, especially history. This gathering also provided an occasion for British Africanist scholars to assess the development of their craft in the previous three decades or so. If such a meeting had been held in the 1960s, it would have been a jamboree. This one was not. Polly Hill, an authority in "African economic anthropology", "was alarmed at the insistence made on her for theory before the empirical data to construct it were yet available."⁷ For her, it seems, the issue of method was too obvious to merit attention. Method meant the empiricism, a natural way of conducting scholarly investigation.

The question of relevance is with us more than ever before. The audience has become more critical. The demand for cultural heroes is no more. There is a crisis in African studies. It appears so deep that a pioneer of African studies, Ranger, has been forced to remember the erstwhile consensus in Africa studies with nostalgia to

some extent unbecoming of a "critical" professional scholar of his stature.

Any one who served, even as a foot soldier (he says), in the armies that fought and won these battles can remember the sense of solidarity and excitement. I can remember myself my admiration for the coherence and vigour of the strategy for research embodied in the first issue of the *Journal [of African History]*; my gratitude for the first synthesising works which made undergraduate teaching possible; my even greater gratitude for the essential demonstrations of the respectability of oral history or of linguistic history. I can remember exhilaration of being part of the small but active historiographical communities which developed in East and Central Africa. And I can remember the sense that the historians of Africa everywhere were engaged in the same task of *demonstration* of the possibility and vitality of the field.

Looking back at all this, my emotions of admiration and excitement and gratitude to the pioneers still persist. These *were* times to have lived through and to bore students by recalling. But thinking back over it — re-reading the whole run of the *Journal*; re-reading pioneer works in oral history, in historical linguistics and historical archaeology; reviewing what was produced at Dar es Salaam or Nairobi or Ibadan — I can see more clearly what the costs were.

In any case such were the days to be remembered for "the harsher climate is with us." The golden age of consensus has been replaced by the iron age.⁸

Ranger argues that notion which constitute the so-called high noon of the African historiographical revolution are now known to have been flabby. He blames his flabbiness on the audience for which African history was written. This, however, seems strange for there were radical historians who pointed out the loopholes in such arguments as those of local initiative in the making of African history quite early on. Walter Rodney, for example, is known to have argued that it is not as subjects of history that African migrant labourers and peasants should be judged, but as objects of exploitation. African initiative, according to Rodney, was lost with the onslaught of colonialism.⁹

Even so, Ranger declared war against his critics. Thus he wrote in 1968 that the "Africanist historian, who follows up the suggestions of Professor Ajayi or Dr. Lonsdale and who emphasizes African activity, African adaptation, African choice, African initiative, will increasingly find his main adversaries not in the discredited colonial school but in radical pessimists."¹⁰ For Ranger, his critics were pessimists because they refused to glorify the prevailing order. It is surprising that he should have been at loggerheads with a method of investigation which he nonetheless admitted had yielded so impressive results in European social history as evidenced by such admirable studies as those of Edward Thompson and Eric Hobsbawn.¹¹

Nevertheless, not all historians, Africanist and African, seem to be aware of the crisis in their craft. This is particularly so with Nigerian scholars like Lalage Bown who have pointed out that "millions are being spent on extending the existing educational system to include universal primary education."¹² Perhaps by crisis is meant failure to solve current African problems which is unfortunate because scholars are usually interested in their own craft for its own sake!¹³ Even so there are some areas of African studies in which the crisis seems not to have been felt so far. This is so for example with "public administration", a new flourishing branch of African studies which was introduced in the aftermath of the discrediting of

the colonial empire to train “natives” as successors to the colonial guardians since unlike their predecessors they were not born rulers.¹⁴ According to Thurstan Shaw, there is also African archaeology which still remains bouyant. In any case, it seems, “constant questioning of methodology is not a sign of crisis but of vitality, witnessed by the steadily increasing number of African archaeologists.”¹⁵

For other Africanists, however, the crisis is real, and there has been a demand for “a more explicitly radical framework of analysis” in place of the Whig interpretation of African history¹⁶ seen as the realization of the idea of enlargement of scale.¹⁷ Thus Ranger who in the 1960s had declared an all out war on the so-called radical pessimists has called for a pragmatic response to their point of view.¹⁸ Ranger presumes that the crisis in African history has been brought about by the increasing popularity of the radical pessimists. The crisis in African history, however, is a crisis of method not to be understood narrowly as the efficient collection and assessment of data, but as “*the principles of investigation and evaluation in scientific practice.*”¹⁹

The call for a pragmatic response to the crisis is indicative of the failure of the empirical method to produce an objective history of Africa, an impossible enterprise in any case since notwithstanding pretensions of impartiality the method has been from the very beginning partisan.²⁰ The empirical method emerged as a liberal outlook in the course of the bourgeois struggle against feudal order. In place of heavenly intervention in worldly matters was posed the idea of man’s motives. The confidence with which this outlook was held was indicative of the confidence of the bourgeoisie themselves. Progress was regarded as inevitable.²¹ Thus Macaulay wrote of progress as follows:

It has lengthened life; it has mitigated pain; it has extinguished diseases; it has increased the fertility of the soil; it has given new security to the mariner; it has furnished new arms to the warrior; it has spanned great rivers and estuaries with bridges of form unknown to our fathers; it has guided the thunderbolt innocuously from heaven to earth; it has lighted up the night with the splendour of the day; it has extended the range of human vision; it has accelerated motion; it has annihilated distance; it has facilitated intercourse, correspondence, all friendly offices, all despatch business; it has enabled man to descend to the depths of the sea, to soar into the air, to penetrate securely into the noxious recess of the earth to traverse the land in cars which whirl along without horses, and the ocean in ships which run ten knots an hour against the wind. These are but a part of the fruits, and of its first fruits. For it is the philosophy which never rests, which has never attained, which is never perfect. Its law is progress. A point which was yesterday invisible is its goal today, and will be its starting-point tomorrow.²²

This rationalist view of the world, however began to crumble by the middle of the nineteenth century. The emergence of the proletariat as powerful force, as well as the philosophy of Marxism turned the liberal outlook of progress into pessimism.²³ Empericism was turned into pragmatism, the bourgeois ideology of monopoly capitalism.²⁴

The bourgeoisie had believed in the rationality of man as well as his motives. With the rise of monopoly capitalism both have been doubted. Thus the founder of pragmatism, John Dewey, complied with Emerson’s assertion that “No facts to me

are sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no past at my back”²⁵ In place of the idea of progress in history was substituted the notion of history as the historian’s experience. “In place of the serene confidence of earlier bourgeois historians during the period of ascendant bourgeois society, today, in the present period of general crisis of capitalism the majority of bourgeois historians have fallen into impotent scepticism or frivolous nihilism, denying any pattern in history or referring all to chance events or the character of individuals.”²⁶

Professional African history was introduced as a sequel to the political awakening of the African petty bourgeoisie. Their confidence was shown in the works of their traditional intellectuals whether hired for this purpose or otherwise. To start with it was believed that the story of their development comprised the early stages of the realization of the bourgeois revolution in Africa. But this was a false assumption since the bourgeois revolution was imposed on the continent with the European colonization of the area.²⁷ The economic and intellectual crisis of the African petty bourgeois which ensued soon after the wind of change erupted was therefore neither inherently African nor symptomatic of the birth pangs of the rise of African capitalism, but an extension of the dilemma of capitalism in the age of imperialism.

The main interest in African history at the moment is relevant history. This demand has been interpreted to mean that history “should have a clear and immediate bearing upon ... current interest and inspiration.” In question, however, is what constitutes current interests and inspirations. For some this constitutes part of the general challenge to the establishment. For others it is symptomatic of the penetration of foreign ideology. “Not surprisingly, academics generally have reacted unfavourably to it on the traditionally hallowed grounds that an academic subject is studied for its own sake.”²⁸ But the call for relevant history is not a call for relevant information alone. Rather it is a call to shift the debate to its proper terrain. viz. the production and reproduction of social knowledge.²⁹

Ranger asserts that the crisis in African professional history should be received pragmatically. Yet it seems that it is not history *per se* which is in crisis, but the philosophy of pragmatism or empiricism on which this enterprise is based. This philosophy sees the world as a universe of billiard balls. These balls can be individuals, facts, a mosaic of evidence, commodities and so forth.³⁰ Nevertheless, there are those who would like to find out the basis of the abstract individual, commodity, or fact. For some, the endeavour to concretize what is apparently abstract is to philosophize. But it has been noted that “those who abuse philosophy most are slaves to precisely the worst vulgarized relics of the worst philosophies.”³⁰ The variety of opinions contained in the essays presented to Davidson is a clear indication of this. Africanists of West Africa assert that there is no crisis in their craft. Those concerned with East and Central Africa suggest otherwise. In South Africa, Shula Marks demonstrates convincingly that studies of this area still remain backward. Is the “sacred fact” alone responsible for this kind of situation? Lastly, a bibliography of Davidson’s works would have been very helpful to a student interested in the polymath.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Fyfe, p.2.
2. Ibid. pp. 8 — 9.
3. London 1959.
4. B. Davidson, *Africa: History of a Continent*, London 1966.
5. B. Davidson, *Black mother*, London 1961.
6. J.T.C. Liu and P.J. Golas, eds. *Change in Sung China*, Lexington, Mass. 1969. M. Elvin, *The Patterns of the Chinese Past*, London 1973.
7. Fyfe, op. cit.
8. T.O. Ranger, "Towards a usable past," Fyfe, op. cit.
9. W. Rodney, *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*, London 1972.
10. See the introduction in T.O. Ranger, *Emerging themes of African history*, Nairobi 1968.
11. Ibid.
12. Fyfe, op. cit.
13. L. Kapteijns, *African historiography written by Africans* Leiden 1977.
14. A.H.M. Kirk - Greene, "Public administration and African studies," Fyfe, op. cit.
15. T. Shaw, "Changes in African archaeology in the past forty years," Fyfe, op. cit.
16. Ibid.
17. D.A. Low, *Buganda in modern history*, London 1971.
18. Ranger, "Towards a usable past," op. cit.
19. H. Bernstein and J. Depelchin, "The object of African history: a materialist perspective," *History in Africa* 5 1978.
20. H. Marcuse, "Repressive tolerance," R.P. Wolff, B. Moore and H. Marcuse, *A critique of pure tolerance*, Boston 1969.
21. R.L. Heilbroner, *The future as history*, New York 1961. pp. 30 — 35.
22. Quoted by J.H. Plumb, ed; *Crisis in the humanities*, Harmondsworth 1964.
23. H'S. Hughes, *Consciousness and society*, St. Albans 1974.
24. G. Novack, *Empiricism and its evolution*, New York 1971.
25. G. Novack, *Pragmatism versus Marxism*, New York 1975. P. 27.
26. R.P. Dutt, *Problems of contemporary history*, London 1963. p. 13.
27. H. Alavi, "India and the colonial mode of production", *Socialist Register* 1975.
28. G. Conell-Smith and H.A. Llyd, *The relevance of history*, London 1972.
29. Bernstein and Depelchin, op. cit.
30. W. James, *Pragmatism* New York 1967.
31. L. Séve, *Marxism and the theory of human personality*, London. p. 9.