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REVIEW ARTICLE

ON REASON AND AFRO-PESSIMISM

Patrick Chabal

RICHARD WERBNER, *Reasonable Radicals and Citizenship in Botswana: the public anthropology of Kalanga elites*. Bloomington and Indianapolis IN: Indiana University Press (hb $60.00 – 978 0 25334 402 1; pb $24.95 – 978 0 25321 677 9). 2004, 254 pp.

The publication of Richard Werbner's *Reasonable Radicals* offers an opportunity to revisit the issue of Afro-pessimism – a charge levelled at much Africanist scholarship in the last decade. But first I want to set the scene within which the argument has raged in the past few years. The recent emphasis on agency in Africa is part of a reaction by many Africanist scholars against what they perceive as the unduly negative image of the continent. They, and others, have come to the view that the spate of hard-hitting books that have been published in the last decade on the manifest failure of African states to set Africa on a course of development has now come to vitiate our very ability to understand what is happening there. Whilst not denying the depth of what might be called the African 'crisis', they insist that there is much going on that is positive – thus providing evidence that Africans are capable of surmounting the difficult predicament in which they find themselves.

There is little doubt that concentrating on agency forces us to reconsider the main questions Africanists have been asking since independence. Instead of raising the issue of why Africa has *not* developed, we are directed to consider the extraordinary ways in which Africans have adapted to a rapidly changing world order. From a context in the 1960s when the Cold War was at its height and the former colonial powers still had strong influence in their former territories to the present globalized world in which financial, communication and trade flows have accelerated, Africa's situation has evolved massively. A focus on the adjustments Africans have had to make to these global influences brings out the ability of both rulers and peoples to grasp the opportunities available to them and deploy them to purposeful effect – as a few examples make plain.

The agility demonstrated by African governments in maximizing resource transfers within the radically different environments of the Cold War, structural adjustment and, today, rapid globalization is truly impressive. Equally, the speed at which Africans have deployed the discourse and instruments of democracy to force greater accountability on their governors is remarkable. On another register, the ease with which Africans have adapted to the spread of the mobile phone and the Internet to facilitate commerce and migration is nothing short of

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astonishing. By the same token, the so-called informal economies have thrived in and beyond Africa. Finally, the rapid development of local NGOs as well as the increasingly organized and vocal intervention of civil society organizations (CSOs) demonstrates the potential for 'grassroots' organizations to influence politics.

Concentrating attention on what has contributed to major political, social and economic changes in the last decade forces analysts to think again about the instruments they use to explain these events and processes. This can be illustrated by looking at three areas in which a different research focus has changed our understanding: (1) there is now a new analytical framework that accounts for the very important patterns and consequences of intra-Africa migration, which goes beyond the common assumption that Africans seek primarily to leave the continent; (2) asking how democratization has worked in practice has brought out the need to study much more carefully what might be called 'traditional' forms of political accountability; (3) studying how communities in Africa have faced up to the issues of violence and justice points to the variegated forms of the so-called 'traditional' methods, which have in practice proved worthwhile.

These advances in our understanding of African social and political agency are important. They force us to revise any overall notion of causality we may have taken for granted by dint of the theoretical or conceptual frameworks we've been prone to use over the years. There is certainly no doubt that any preconceived analytical scheme that does not allow for the study of the myriad instances of social action to be observed in contemporary Africa is likely seriously to distort our account of what is happening there.

Richard Werbner's *Reasonable Radicals* is a book supporting the argument that Africanists need to study the instances of success – not just because they tend to get too little publicity but also because they are likely to change our outlook on African politics. Under the guise of a simple case study, it aims to jolt the world of anthropology and to blast the world of Africanists with a simple but powerful message: stop demonizing Africa; try to see it for what it is. What it is, at least in Botswana.

Reasonable Radicals is a reasonable book that packs a serious punch and one ought to praise the author for being unfashionable. We do not need any more books on Africa that tell us what we know already – even less, that confirm what we think we know. We need books that tell us what we do not know, or do not want to hear. And this book tells us that what we do not recognize is the extent to which there are in Africa 'reasonable radicals' – that is, politicians who put the public good before their own self-interest and who are not afraid of challenging the *status quo*. So, our first reaction, as scholars who are genuinely interested in Africa (as opposed to journalists who only want to sell a story) should be to cheer. For two reasons: the first is that this is a feel-good story; the second is that what has happened in Botswana may well happen elsewhere on the continent.

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Werbner is, in the best possible sense (and I mean this as a compliment), a 'grumpy old man' – or rather a wise old man, an elder as it were – who is fed up with Afro-pessimism, fed up with self-regarding and narcissistic anthropology, fed up with the neglect of the 'golden age' of anthropology and fed up with academic snobbishness against the study of African elites. Here again, we should rejoice at such a stance. The death of scholarship is political correctness, in whatever shape or form. And African Studies have had more than their fair share of political correctness. Listen, Werbner says, I have a good story to tell and that story matters for the understanding of post-colonial Africa. It is not just my own pleasant experience in the sunny country of Botswana; it is an important development in a continent that is often seen merely as a basket case. For all these reasons, I think it is in fact incumbent upon us Africanists to take *Reasonable Radicals* very seriously. It is a book that merits respect and deserves attention.

So, what are the book's arguments? I write here not as an anthropologist and not as a specialist on Botswana. So my remarks must be seen as those of a political scientist working on Africa and with an interest in any work that is liable to challenge received wisdom, either in disciplinary terms or in terms of area studies. What, then, is new in *Reasonable Radicals*? Well, quite a lot actually, but I will only highlight four areas: the first is a study of an African elite carried out over four decades on the basis of distinctly personal association with the people concerned – which few of us could emulate; the second is the attempt to construct what Werbner calls a public anthropology; the third is an argument about the evolving nature of post-colonial politics in Botswana (and, perhaps, by implication in Africa); the last is a case against Afro-pessimism. I take these in turn.

THE KALANGA ELITE

Werbner's acquaintance with the Kalanga elite, about whom he writes so eloquently, is a great strength. He got to know many of them before independence and has since then met and socialized with them on countless occasions. This undoubtedly affords an unparalleled insight into what makes them tick and is itself reason enough to read the book. Since there is a clear acknowledgement of the subjective nature of such 'research', which is properly delineated at every stage, there can be no complaint. However, Werbner will not be surprised to hear that there is a way in which the book reads like a paean to an exceptional group of people who have been both powerful and self-aware – an historically distinct group, who are now retiring and may or may not be followed by similarly dedicated and elevated Kalanga (or other) elites.

So the question that must be asked – even if it has been asked a thousand times before – is how accurate their portrayal is. There is a fine line between a detailed rendering of the lives of clearly remarkable people and an insufficiently critical account. Much as I admired the rich tapestry thus presented, I did ask myself whether the author had been

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a trifle partial to Gobe Matenge, one of the 'heroes' of the book and admittedly an extraordinary 'character'. Having written a biography myself, I am well aware of the difficulties involved – and of the unfair slur that one's work is essentially hagiography (which I have also had to endure) – but I did feel on occasions that Werbner could have stepped back a little in his exposition of these fascinating men – and they are all men – to become more of a devil's advocate. There are many questions that occur to the reader, which did not seem to register with the author. Surely, a more testing probe of the nature of the possible 'exceptionalism' of the case study would have strengthened the argument.

A PUBLIC ANTHROPOLOGY?

What of a public anthropology? Well, as a non-anthropologist I have no quarrel with the enterprise. In fact I fully subscribe to it. We certainly need much better research on Africa's elites, whether political or business. That much is not in doubt. The question is merely how best to do it. I do not think the difficulty here has to do with method. Any method may work, provided it offers genuine added value in understanding. The issue is much more that of the questions asked. With regard to what I know a little – that is, politics in Africa – it seems to me that the author did not set out explicitly what specific questions he wanted to answer. From what I could gauge, the agenda appears to have been set by what these elites themselves have said or done. This is of course critical material, but perhaps not the best-designed perspective from which to work out in which ways these elites may be self-serving whilst not being corrupt. I know that Werbner is tired of our cynicism but it seems to me that social scientists must always be cynical when it comes to the workings of politics, any politics, in Africa as in other parts of the world, including (if I may be allowed to say so) in his native land, the USA, to which he refers critically in the book. It would be odd if Botswana should be different in this respect.

Furthermore, I found it a little surprising that the book took virtually no account of the extensive literature on elites published by sociologists and political scientists – especially since Werbner advocates a public anthropology that crosses disciplinary boundaries (p. 5). Or, for that matter, that he hardly referred to the literature on elites produced by historians and anthropologists of Africa. The point here is not to imply that a review of this literature is needed *a priori* – a position I do not hold, as is clear from my own work – but simply to suggest that there could have been approaches, concepts and theories that might have helped him to sharpen the questions he wanted to ask – or perhaps I should say to make them more comparative. Since there is a vast, and often heuristically valuable, scholarship on the role of elites in a wide range of countries, it would surely have been helpful to indicate at least what areas of elite studies are particularly relevant to the study of African politics.

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Even bearing in mind that the book did not aim to give an exhaustive account of the political elites in Botswana, but merely to give an anthropological account of a group of the Kalanga ones, it seems to me that there are general questions about the definition, role and analysis of elites that might have warranted attention. Botswana is special but it cannot be so special that no comparison with the rest of Africa, or the world, is possible. Werbner himself wants his case study to change our agenda for the study of politics elsewhere. For better or worse, what most intrigues the rest of us is why Botswana should be so different from the rest of Africa. It is a legitimate question, I think, and it would be good if books on that country helped us to make some progress in answering it. Indeed, how we answer that comparative question will go a long way towards determining how we see the future of Africa.

POST-COLONIAL POLITICS

The book makes a strong claim for politics in Botswana: namely that it has evolved capable governments operating within a strong state fully committed to plural democracy, the rule of law, transparency, equality of all citizens and development. The argument is that the Kalanga elites have both contributed to, and benefited from, the construction of such a state and that, as a result, they are fully devoted to the common weal. I am not qualified enough to debate whether such claims are accurate or not, although I do know they are by no means uncontested. I must limit my remarks to the way in which this argument is put together.

The book refers only briefly at the beginning to the substantial literature on the Botswana exception – a subject that is of importance not just to the specialists of that country but to all those who have tried to understand, and explain, why Botswana was singular and singularly successful in achieving accountable politics. And although the author warns that he does not intend to revisit that literature, it seems odd that he does not at least pick up the main points that have generally been made to explain this outcome – especially since some of them are clearly relevant to the role of the elites.

One issue that emerges clearly from the evidence presented in the book is the growing involvement of politicians and civil servants in business – particularly the trend towards investing in share capitalism rather than cattle. The author intimates that such involvement is above board and clean, particularly as concerns those who have retired from the civil service. This may well be so but it would not seem irrelevant here to touch on the growing disparities in the country. Disparities occur in our own democracies – as we all know too well – and they are legitimate questions for debate.

Moreover, excessive disparities have political consequences and the question is, therefore, what these consequences could be in Botswana, both for the elites and for the ways in which politics is conducted. Might it be possible that in the not too distant future Botswana's elites will redefine the political rules of the game so as to keep their privileges?

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Or is this an irrelevant question? Whatever the answer, the book provides little by way of justified criticisms of the cosy arrangements whereby politicians and civil servants enrich themselves faster than their fellow citizens. What are the institutional arrangements in place to guarantee that democracy will survive such self-interest, especially after export earnings begin to diminish?

AFRO-PESSIMISM

Finally, the book is billed as an antidote to Afro-pessimism, which is of course welcome, and we need, therefore, to read it as such. But first a few words from someone who has often been labelled an Afro-pessimist – a label I reject, preferring to see myself (if one *must* be labelled) as an Afro-realist. Whatever the case, it is well here to distinguish at least between two different types of Afro-pessimism.

The first, which is widespread, is that which consists in associating three forms of Africa-bashing: a notion of the continent as being backward; an essentialist view of Africans' ability, or inability, to think and act for themselves; and a determinist explanation of why Africa cannot, and will not, develop. This is the stuff of journalism, of lazy clichés – which, by the way, are now applied not just to Africa but to large swathes of the globe (East or Central Asia, for instance), areas which are said not to have yet seen the light of liberal democracy and capitalism.

The second has to do with much recent scholarly work on Africa that seeks to provide an analysis of what has happened since independence in non-teleological terms. Whilst the import of that work may not be overly cheering, we should remember that part of the reason why this is so is because it has come after decades of rose-tinted books telling us why it was that Africa was not *yet* OK but how it would surely *soon* be OK.

The trouble is that these two types of Afro-pessimism – if indeed the second qualifies as such – are all too easily conflated by those who dislike what the second group has to say, of which there are many both in Africa and elsewhere. But this is another debate, to which Africanists will no doubt have to return.

Reasonable Radicals is not a book that takes issue with what one might call a 'theory' of Afro-pessimism – meaning the critique of a type of Africanist analysis that sets out to assess Africa in Western terms, which are seen not to be appropriate – so there is no point in debating that. It is – and this is much more interesting – a book that claims to offer a story that invalidates the argument that African politicians are 'inherently' incapable of running a country efficiently, without corruption and for the benefit of all its inhabitants. It is a book that tells us that such achievements are possible in a post-colonial context where the elites build on the wise deployment of 'tradition' – that is, the modern use of customary virtues. Again, as a non-Botswana specialist

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I will have to leave to others the assessment of whether this is indeed the case or not. I very much hope it is.

I very much hope Botswana will continue to shine as an example of African success, a counter to those who think that the possession of rich minerals is a sure recipe for corruption, violence and degradation. It had better do so because – Afro-pessimists or not – there is no other such success story. In fact, mineral resources, particularly oil, are now often seen to have become a curse, and a newly minted theory is that it is the poor countries (like Mali) that may have a better chance of becoming democratic and free. Whatever there may be in that argument, which reeks of desperation to me, let us return to *Reasonable Radicals*.

Werbner writes: 'Against Afro-pessimism, the public anthropology of Botswana has a critical part to play in rewriting the current Africanist agenda. The reasons for that spring as much from the fresh theoretical directions in public anthropology as from the increasing comparative interest in Botswana's postcolonial transformations' (p. 2). So the argument is twofold: one having to do with a distinct type of anthropology; the other with the way in which Botswana might be, if not a model, at least an example to emulate.

On public anthropology, I have already said that there might well be less resistance to what Werbner is advocating than he himself thinks there is. Indeed, to take but one example, there is today a huge interest among Africanist social scientists in the analysis of the role of so-called 'traditional' elites in post-colonial Africa, which is beginning to transform our understanding of the relationship between 'formal' and 'informal' politics. On the second, I think Werbner is needlessly defensive. There is justified debate on the nature of the Botswana exception and on the even more relevant question of whether the state will be able to continue on the path of virtuous development that has marked it since independence. That is a matter of evidence, not just of opinion. Kenneth Good's recent book – *Diamonds, Dispossession and Democracy in Botswana* – is quite sceptical about this claim.

Where I think we need further enlightenment is on the conditions that have made Botswana a success story. Here, I hear Werbner's injunction to take that story seriously and I think all of us will want to do just that. On the other hand, we need to know more about what makes a 'reasonable radical'. Is this a one-off? Can it be cultivated? Is it a product of a particular form of British colonial rule – different in Bechuanaland than, say, in Nigeria or the Gold Coast – and if so why? Was it a matter of employing expatriate bureaucrats until sufficient bureaucratic institutionalization had taken place? Has it to do with the context of southern African history? Was it a product of a very distinct conglomeration of African societies, which came together into this unlikely nation? Or is it all about diamonds? I confess I do not know but I would want the Botswana specialists to make it easier for me to understand. Not just because that history is fascinating but above all because I want to understand how the book is going to change the Africanist agenda.

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This is a very serious question, which matters to me greatly at this point since I am in the process of writing another book on African politics, which is intended to revisit *Africa Works* critically. Therefore, I want to know how *Reasonable Radicals* should change my thinking: approach, method, analysis – the lot. I want to know how best I can integrate its fascinating material into a more general book that compares the post-colonial experience of those countries that were ruled by the French, British, Portuguese, Spanish and Italians from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. If the study of Botswana is going to inflect the sort of comparative work some of us do, then we need to understand how both the public anthropology framework and the insights the book offers should re-direct us to think differently. However, and much to my disappointment, the book did not provide sufficient analytical and comparative insights to point me in the way of reform. I am now aware of the extraordinarily illuminating story of the Kalanga elites but I still do not know how that is relevant to any more general attempt to make sense of post-colonial Africa as a whole. Nor do I know how that example can be emulated elsewhere on the continent.

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