J. of Modern African Studies, 41, 3 (2003), pp. 477–483. © 2003 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S0022278X03004336 Printed in the United Kingdom

Rejoinder to Stephen Ellis

Thandika Mkandawire

Stephen Ellis's response can be divided into two parts. One concerns my interpretation of the violence of rebel movements in Africa; the other relates to my misunderstanding of his position. With respect to the former, Ellis raises four objections. I will start with these.

His first objection is to my argument that the urban origins and agendas of these movements, and the inhospitable rural environment, explain much of the movements' violence against the peasantry. Ellis finds the urban/rural divide not particularly useful because of the fluidity of the boundaries between these spatial categories and the identities of urban and rural dwellers. According to the lights of postmodern world of identity politics what we have is the hybrid/worker/migrant/peasant etc. Such fluidity, in Ellis's view, would invalidate the identification of any political position as either urban or rural. The problem of transient identities is, of course, an old one in Africa. In the 1960s and 1970s, a time of rapid post-independence urbanisation, the concept of 'straddling' was used to characterise the position of urban actors who had a foot in the rural areas. However, recognition of such straddling did not lead to rejection of the salience of the urban/rural divide. And many observers of Africa, including those of whom I am critical, acknowledge the salience of the urban/rural divide and use it as an analytical tool. The whole debate on the role of 'lumpens' in Sierra Leone is about urban youth. Paul Richards (1996: 125–38) suggests as one of the reasons for the brutality of RUF the fact that the leadership was a 'town-oriented excluded elite, not a group with strong place-specific community links'. Indeed, Ellis himself has no problem in suggesting that there 'is evidence that rural people have a highly ambiguous attitude towards their capital city, which they regard simultaneously as a place where they aspire to live but also as a source of corruption and exploitation. On which in circumstances of war, they may take revenge by destroying buildings and plundering what country people feel to be rightfully theirs'. Thus he attributes the violence wreaked in Sierra Leone, Brazzaville and Monrovia to the retributive anger of rural folks. Ellis also seems to subscribe to the 'urban bias' thesis when he suggests that 'many displaced peasants are heading for the places that are

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home to the very elites who have been complicit in draining the provinces of their wealth over a long period of time'. He goes on to suggest that it is these very 'same elites who, although by no means solely responsible for the violence in the rural areas, manipulate that violence in such a way as to benefit from it'. So urban/rural location has specific political effects after all. I should point out here that the urban character of the rebel movements I discussed did not refer to the eventual numerical composition of their 'foot soldiers', but rather to their origins, leadership and agenda. Ellis's own accounts of rebel movements in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Brazzaville point to the urban origins of the leadership and initial agenda of the movements.

Concerning my assertion that 'there are no urban guerrilla movements in Africa, in the sense of movements whose fighting terrain is urban (as were the Tupamaros in Uruguay)', Ellis raises his second objection, listing a number of cases of urban violence. Yet not every urban conflict constitutes guerrilla warfare. There are many cases of religious or political youth brigades, or militias, clashing in the urban areas; but by no definition could these movements be considered urban guerrillas in the commonly accepted sense. Not even the 'Ninjas' of Brazzaville have these characteristics.

Third, Ellis objects to my passing judgement on the ideological positions of some of the movements, and especially to my suggestion that 'the motley crew of urban youth and alienated local youth' might produce incoherent ideologies and might suffer from bouts of 'false consciousness' or do things that are morally repugnant. He believes such a position to be 'foolish' since presumably it ignores 'people's understanding of why they act'. First, my reference was to the movements, not to the communities from which the youth came. Youth may cite any number or reasons for joining movements – the causes of their own plight, the support enjoyed by and the ideologies of the movements and the seriousness of their leaders etc. – yet such reasons may be highly questionable. Second, while Ellis refuses to be judgemental about local communities, he seems to have no problems condemning the 'narrow ideological prism of nationalism' through which the elites understand things. It appears then that while the ideological positions of local communities and youth can never be fuzzy or narrow, those of elites can be. At what level of the social scale or geographical location are we allowed to make judgements? Self-sufficient moral communities do not exist anywhere in Africa, and the kind of distance that Ellis seems to recommend reduces local communities to moral infants with which one cannot engage in serious ethical and moral debates. In addition, conflating knowledge and beliefs, Ellis simply asks us to

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take local understanding uncritically, and confers upon such understanding a coherence and historical continuity that would probably suffocate any culture. Every culture has constantly to reconcile its beliefs with old and newly acquired knowledge. Third, the extreme morally isolationist cultural relativism that Ellis insists upon poses a number of problems. How detached can one be? It is unlikely that researchers in Liberia or Sierra Leone can afford the kind of distancing that Ellis apparently requires. It seems to me that one thing a social scientist can do under the circumstances is to point out that some of the things these movements do violate the very principles in which they profess to believe, or that based on our knowledge of similar experiences, their actions are counterproductive.

Ellis makes reference to nationalist ideology and nationalist historiography, yet the relevance of these to my analysis is not evident. The reason I brought in some of the lessons of successful guerrilla movements in Africa was not to glorify nationalist movements, but simply to point out how ideologies and organisational capacities have played an important role in guerrilla warfare, and how they have affected its nature even within similar cultural contexts. It was also make the point that the experiences of these movements are part of Africa's political landscapes and histories. Ellis is aware of the importance of ideologies and historical understanding to the success of rebel movements; indeed, he attributes the relatively good behaviour of nationalist movements to the Western ideologies that influenced them. Young radicals who think they are following in the footsteps of Cabral or Che Guevara can be judged by what we know about the history of movements inspired by such ideologies. Simple evocation of the origins of the behaviour of these movements does not help us much.

Finally, in his fourth objection, Ellis dismisses my distinction between 'stationary' and 'roving' rebels. By stating that 'all of them aimed to control a core territory and to derive income from it', he seems to interpret these as strategies chosen by movements themselves. My point was that rebel movements would, of course, like to occupy some 'liberated zone' – but for many reasons few rebel movements in Africa have enjoyed over a long period of time and a large territory the kind of 'stationarity' that UNITA enjoyed in Angola.

Ellis suggests I should also have considered the 'new wars' arguments of Mary Kaldor and Mark Duffield. I am aware of these arguments, but I remain sceptical that the cases they cite can sustain the generalisations they make. Significantly, most of the contributors to the new wars paradigm have worked at the local level either as anthropologists or as philanthropists. Many have observed, at close range, war and its interaction with the larger world of aid, arms dealing, etc.[1] As a result of their

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experiences, some have suggested, they are mindful of something that donors and national elites have missed – the 'local' – with the more daring ones going so far as to suggest that the 'local' constitutes the foundation upon which the larger edifice rests. In the extreme, they end up denying the autonomy and irreducibility of macro-level processes. To the extent that some proponents of this paradigm (e.g. William Reno) build on the same understanding of local-level processes that I have criticised, and given the limits of space, I did not consider it necessary to dwell on their extrapolations from these experiences to the global level. There is, however, a difference between Ellis and writers like Duffield with whom he claims affinity. While he equates 'context' with the 'local' and the 'cultural', others have a more sophisticated view of context as layered: local, national, regional and global, with mediating relations between these strata. Moreover, context is not just cultural – it is also economic, political, epistemological, and so on. Ellis is so focused on the local context that he fails to understand fully, for example, the implications of his own account of Liberian history and the global conjuncture that he cites as giving rise to some of the proximate causes of what has happened to Liberia. It seems that Ellis is attracted to the 'local' and the 'cultural' precisely because this allows him to detach it from the 'global', on one hand, and the 'economic' and the 'political', on the other. And even when the 'national' or the 'global' is evoked, there is a presupposition that the reactions it provokes at the local level are uniquely determined by local context and culture. But we know that there is an enormous variety of local-level responses. Take the case of youth. Why should youth in one locale who are alienated by globalisation not withdraw from it and seek solace in the moral community, as has happened in some places? Simply saying 'generational differences' will not do. On closer reading, the 'global' and 'national' form the backdrop to struggles by youth implacably caught up in appeasing the ghosts of slain relations or settling scores with their elders. The new wars that globalisation has putatively spawned are incomprehensible without some understanding of the political and socioeconomic consequences of globalisation. In the African case, the manifestations of globalisation in the economic sphere have taken the form of structural adjustment whose immediate effects have been in the urban areas. There is a relationship between state-centred and societal forms of violence, just as there is between global violence (or the environment of impunity for certain kinds of political violence) and local violence.

Ellis takes umbrage that I have placed him in a category of culturalist writers, some of whose writing is racist. He believes that I have misunderstood his position partly because I have not (curiously in his mind)

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taken account of his major work on Liberia. He first argues that he does not use the words 'culture' or 'race', but then proceeds to argue the importance of culture in giving meaning to forms of violence. Historical anthropology is an inherently difficult discipline, especially when it seeks to relate contemporaneously the symbolic and material worlds, both of which are changing. The temptation is to hold something constant. No wonder for all the claims to history, Ellis's cultural categories seem timeless. That is where the essentialising starts and, in the process, the line between multiculturalism and the new racism (or new barbarism) is often blurred.

Ellis begins with the David Lewis article on lynching, arguing that the meaning of violence is best established by its changing historical context. The problem is that he then shifts to a totally contradictory mode of argument, one that puts the onus on culture as opposed to history. This is how the cultural explanation goes: (a) there are different types of violence, 'Western' and 'postcolonial ethnic', of which we are given two examples, Rwanda and Cambodia. (b) Then comes an astonishing sentence, part of a quote, which claims that it is not possible to compare these (i.e. Western and non-Western) forms of violence: 'even careful analysis of Western forms of violence, such as the Nazi genocide, are not necessarily relevant to the understanding of postcolonial ethnic violence, such as the genocides in Rwanda and Cambodia, precisely because "genocide" is there mediated through cultural forms with which Westerners are often unfamiliar'.

This illuminating quote shows that, for Ellis, meaning is to be derived from context, and context stands for culture. And so despite the insistence on the diversity of cultures and the hybridity of cultures, his analysis is stuck in the cult of alterity in which essentialising of people and their local contexts is not far from the surface. In this way, one risks finding oneself in the company of those racists who understand political violence in Africa as 'black-on-black violence'.

Ellis alludes to Walter Benjamin's call for the cultural contextualisation of violence. No one would doubt that violence draws heavily from culture. But given the contradictory nature of any cultural repertoire, the exact pinpointing of which aspects of a culture explain or symbolise which forms of violence is an extremely treacherous exercise, and demands familiarity with a culture that is not easily acquired during a brief sojourn. This must explain why local scholars who have to grapple with the complexities of the relationship between current events, and their histories and cultures, are often horrified by the interpretative audacity displayed by their itinerant colleagues. And returning to the Benjamin reference, I am not sure whether Ellis means to draw from Benjamin's 'allegory' that suggests that

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bits and pieces of cultural artefacts (some of them discarded), constitute myths through which individuals in a given period understand the world. The problem with the approach is that the contemporary meaning given to such objects is highly subjective, depending ultimately on the cultural predisposition of the observer. To conclude that an evocation of these artefacts (be they narratives, archaeological findings or ethnographic data) and their meticulous arrangement gives meaning to current forms of violence involves a leap of faith. What constitutes people's 'own context'? And what assurance do we have that Ellis is able to delineate, let alone understand, this context or people's representation of their own understanding? Why are we to believe his rendition of particular beliefs integrated into coherent, all-embracing, culturally transmitted worldviews based upon which forms of violence can be understood? How valid is his account, especially given the conflation of culture and local context?

Ellis inveighs against dominant social scientific theories (especially modernisation theories), preferring instead an approach that emphasises context and hybridity. Yet this approach relies upon *bricolage* or pastiche in which rumours, anecdotes, press interviews, local narratives, etc. are cited in combination, presumably to clinch the argument; but as it turns out, at any given time multiple anecdotes, local narratives and voices vie for attention in Africa and so the anecdote or narrative one privileges is one that makes the pre-selected case. I doubt that any of these, including extended narratives, really help us to make any cumulative and inter-subjective advances in knowledge.

Although my paper was about rebel movements, it was also very much concerned with how Africa is studied. One purpose was to look at African studies as refracted through work on rebel movements. The case of rebels and violence highlighted some of the problems that dog the study of Africa. One has only to consider how a theoretically thin and empirically vacuous account of the rational behaviour of greed-driven rebels was given such media prominence by the World Bank. The ease with which assertions about Africa are admitted in academic circles is incomprehensible in the absence of recognition of the predispositions that lead scholars to suspend incredulity.

In my paper, I also sought to draw attention to two forms of reductionism that underlie some of the more recent political analysis of Africa. One relies on methodological individualism; the other on what I shall call methodological localism. In the case of the former, macro processes are to be deduced from analysis of individual agency; in the case of the latter, the micro foundations of macro processes are to be elicited from the local. Both claim that behind the façade of nationalism, revolt and

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national policy are hidden either greed spawned by the rational pursuit of self-interest, or localisms that, ant-like, eat away at the macro façade. This reductionism appears in unadulterated form in the study of rebel movements.

NOTE

1. As an aside, in earlier periods there was an interesting affinity among those who worked at the local level – anthropologists, missionaries and district commissioners. There is an uncanny resemblance between this grouping and the one constituted by anthropologists and humanitarian workers today.

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