

**Paul Nugent.** *Africa since Independence: A Comparative History.* Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. xix + 620 pp. \$35.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-333-68273-9.



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This is a masterful work of usable academic history. By sharply delineating diverse trends in scores of countries, it applies expert analysis to sub-Saharan Africa, "the continent which has been subjected to the greatest distortions and willful misunderstandings" (p. 1). It addresses the question of how historians may lay claim to the recent past and also how rigorous historical engagement with continuity, change, diversity, and divergence can cut through platitudes about the contemporary world. In this book, Africa has no "fate." [1] It cannot be represented through emblematic case studies of portent development. Some part of the past was always up for grabs and acts of grasping created a good part of recognizable history. Supported by carefully marshaled evidence, Paul Nugent's interpretations are nuanced and sometimes understated. Never didactic, arguments unfold over carefully crafted chapters.

To deliver so much, a book cannot be stingy with detail. This one is not, rounding off with 620 pages. Realizing that some readers will not be

able to do more than graze for specifics, Nugent offers it as "a resource which may be dipped into rather than ... read from cover to cover" (p. 5). The twenty-two students in my seminar on "Africa since 1950" read the whole book in the fall of 2006. [2] At first, they were daunted by its heft, but the experience of reading it with them convinced me that general readers can gain much from the work as a whole. Yet general readers will benefit from some guidance; this review is intended to provide some.

Books about the present face a problem about when to pick up the story. Contemporary history is usually about problems of the present, and, since problems appear more dire in Africa than elsewhere, it is an important interpretive and political act to mark their beginning point. [3] In the introduction, Nugent gives a nod to deeper historical developments and the importance of viewing the *longue durée*, but offers the demurral that accepting its logic does not mean that one has to write one's history *as the longue durée*. He explains his understanding of time scales with a

metaphor of a "complex machine in which a series of wheels propel progressively larger ones." This metaphor notably reverses the direction of turning understood by proponents of the Annales School, who saw the dynamic of the *longue durée* working itself out in immediate events. In contrast, Nugent's "contemporary historian is transfixed by the rapid revolutions of the very small wheels, without knowing whether they will be able to turn the next set of wheels, far less the really big ones at the other end" (p. 4).

A mid-sized wheel in the last half of the twentieth century was the inherited legacy of the "colonial contradiction." The idea of a "colonial contradiction" will be familiar to readers of Fred Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (*Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* [1997]), as well as Partha Chatterjee (*The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* [1993]) and Homi Bhaba (*The Location of Culture* [1994]). It refers to the tension inherent in the imperial project of subjugating people for their own ostensible improvement. Unlike some conceptions of a colonial legacy as a continual drag on continental development, this contradiction feeds change. Twentieth-century European empires compartmentalized the incompatibilities in various ways until the Second World War. In the wake of the war, reforms wound previously manageable tensions into a tight spring that changed everything when it sprung. The release of the torsion provided a dynamo for late twentieth-century history: it impelled nationalist demands, forced colonizers to face them, positioned the state as the center of "development," propelled the new countries through their first decades, and prepared the industrialized capitalized North for a new round of interventions at the end of the century.

Shared inconsistencies in colonial relationships provided the strongest unifying factor in the process of decolonization. Nugent's first chapter, on the processes of decolonization in French, British, and Belgian colonies after the war, high-

lights his skill at juggling many analytical balls. He balances comparisons and differences between different cases even as they change over time. He also discusses and arbitrates between different interpretations of the end of empire. Other historians have thoroughly worked over nationalist and neocolonialist theories, so Nugent invests more effort in testing the planned decolonization thesis. He finds that it, too, fails to account for developments. In Nugent's handling, the interactions between colonial powers, African politicians, and popular movements bristle with variation and cannot adhere to a static model. By 1960, most territories of the continent had passed through roughly similar steps into the postcolonial landscape. Nugent is chary about the landmark quality of this date: he criticizes the tendency to downplay "flag independence," but also cautions that "decolonization did not always represent a sharp rupture" (p. 56).

As he smudges the boundaries of time, Nugent's generalizations about "Africa" are guarded. After delivering the new nations of 1960, he breaks the narrative with a transhistorical survey of demographic, economic, social, and political characteristics to gauge what commonalities existed across the continent. He finds broad patterns in urbanization and the position of the tiny elite class, but other bases for generalization about African countries are less tenable. It is hard to find the factors that always add up to fateful problems: odd geographies are not always so awful, it is possible to compensate for being landlocked, and rich mineral resources can provide a boon or a curse. The ubiquitous urban-rural divide does not allow for generalization about rural areas, which "only really had in common that they were not part of the urban complex" (p. 61). The most constant factor is that the former colonies were specialized commodity exporters.

Having eschewed easy categorizations about African nations, Nugent faces a burden of explaining what constitutes a useful unit of analysis. The

chapter "The Shape of Things to Come" details boundaries and challenges to them. He explains these developments transhistorically, considering Somalia in 1978 before taking up the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963. This may challenge readers who are not familiar with the general trajectory of African history. They may not see the sense of prefacing a discussion of Africa's new countries with careful discussions of Pan-Africanism, federalism, irredentism in Somalia, and the high profile attempts at secessionism in Congo and Nigeria. The students in my seminar did not get it at first. One of them opened our discussion with an ironic thud: "I, for one, couldn't put it down." As their professor, I did not entirely blame them. A more accessible point of entry would have been to engage more directly with the popular truism that Africa owes its problems to colonial surveyors who drew arbitrary boundaries. Nugent takes on the truism by demonstrating that the new countries considered becoming something other than states. He shows rather than tells how colonially constructed units were questioned and nonetheless reconstructed as postcolonial realities. On that basis, the book proceeds to examine nation-states as the operative units in postcolonial African history.

After one hundred pages of questioning the inevitability of decolonization and neocolonial domination, and of generalizing about Africa, we home in on 1960 to make sense of dozens of territories too durable to be taken apart and powerful enough for a degree of innovation. This raises the worthy question of how all these separate histories add up to that of a continent. Nugent answers this question by sorting national building blocks into interesting patterns. His method is to examine a group of two to five countries selected around a particular issue, and discuss their separate trajectories with enough detail to elucidate the categories. For example, on the issue of hereditary rulers, the new countries cleave into several categories: those who kept kings (although what happened to them was not uniform), those who

retained chiefs with local powers, and those who had little use for any sort of traditional rulers. Traditional rulers mattered in the postcolonial period because politicians had to contend with their formal power, legitimacy, and prestige. The historical inheritance of chiefs and kings disintegrated and endured in different ways. The story does not add up to a continental trend; the reader must wait for that.

Economic systems also challenge easy generalization. In a particularly strong analysis, he unpacks comparisons of nonidentical twins: Kenya and Tanzania, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Guinea. These pairings allow him to demonstrate that economic policies made some difference. "Their freedom of choice ultimately proved to be much more limited than nationalist politicians imagined in the early 1960s, but it was also greater than at any other point thereafter" (p. 139). Improvements in access to health and education occurred across the board in the newly independent countries. Divergences in policies produced different outcomes. Tanzanian socialism reduced inequality but through a downward leveling and an abandonment of the principle of consent in rural development. In Kenya, land reforms perpetuated capitalist production and increased inequality. Kenyan politics were competitive, and the game involved delivering largesse to political supporters. A local bourgeoisie developed itself and did at least manage growth in the absence of development. But the long-term promise of growth was not certain.

In Ghana, "back-to-front" socialism through modernist and statist policies killed the peasant goose laying the golden egg of cocoa. Next door in Côte d'Ivoire, Félix Houphouët-Boigny delivered growth to many Ivoiriens. How this growth was delivered is something of a question: possibly through modest government spending, the cultivation of a local capitalist class, productive relations with France, wise stewardship of the agricultural base, or mass deforestation. The system

was unequal, but Ivoriens themselves avoided the bottom levels populated by Burkinabe foreign workers. In contrast, the heavy-handed Guinean state dismantled local capital, alienated foreign capital, and suppressed dissent. Popular resistance and economic malaise resulted. It was better in Senegal where the state accommodated both foreign business and Muslim brotherhoods, which held great influence over peasant peanut farmers. Although peanut production held steady in Senegal, the country did not manage strong growth or effective distribution of wealth.

Through all the variety, a few common developments appear. Skimming of national wealth happened all over. Socialist countries scored higher on redistribution and lower on growth and independence from foreign aid or capital. They emphasized the single party state. Capitalist states also favored one-party states but nurtured a culture of political competition, sometimes around ethnicity. (Ominously, Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire fall into this category.) The economies were all based on agricultural exports, and softening commodity prices and drought affected them all. Debt increased for different reasons. In Côte d'Ivoire debt seemed like a good way to pay for capital improvements; in Tanzania it was necessary to balance the budget. Furthermore, internationally purchased energy was consumed in production and in all cities. In 1974 everyone felt the oil price hikes. These are not new observations, and Nugent is generous with acknowledgments of the researchers who noted these trends in single-country studies. But even if the material is not original, the comparative method adds value by highlighting the range of possibilities in the immediate postcolonial moment.

The topical comparisons continue in the next chapter, with a discussion of military rule through 1985. The high occurrence of successful coups (three per year between 1963 and 1984) caused many to ask whether there was something in Africa's political inheritance that drove these

postcolonial coups. The common inheritance included the colonial training of military officers, the intersection of ethnic rivalry with military resources, frustrated ambitions, disillusionment of wider society with politicians, and the demonstration effect (as it became clear that it was not very difficult to overthrow a civilian government). That said, military governments exhibit more diversity than civilian ones. As with earlier topics, Nugent sorts military governments into categories: caretaker governments that claim the priority of restoring legitimate civilian rule (Ghana 1966), reformists who directly take on the project of governing where civilians failed (Ghana 1972 and successive Nigerian military rulers after the 1967-70 Biafran War), usurpers distinguished by excess (Jean-Bédél Bokassa, Idi Amin, and Mobutu Sese Seko, though they were not the only ones to milk the national treasury), and Marxists (Congo-Brazzaville, Ethiopia, and Burkina Faso). This was a diverse lot. Nugent generalizes military regimes only broadly: they tended to be more violent and less adept at economic planning than civilian regimes.

After independence in 1974 and 1975, the former Portuguese colonies also became Marxist military regimes, but they followed a different route than their military compadres elsewhere on the continent. Following common convention, this book groups Portuguese anticolonial movements with other struggles against white settler rule in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Namibia in a chapter called "Second Liberation." Nugent finds some tension within this set of liberation movements around the issue of guerilla-peasant relations. Lusophone liberation movements fought under the banner of a "people's war." Of them, the Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAICG) led by Amílcar Cabral in Guinea-Bissau came the closest to revolutionizing rural lives, while Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRE-LIMO) in Mozambique came second. In Angola before and after liberation, the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) was preoccupied

with its rivals the Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA) and União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA).

The account of Zimbabwe takes up the story with nationalist efforts in the 1950s, follows it through the split between the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) in 1966, and into the bush war conducted from exile. In another deft engagement with the historical literature, Nugent explores peasant-guerilla relations from both directions, using Terence Ranger's *Peasant Consciousness and Guerilla War in Zimbabwe* (1985) and David Lan's *Guns and Rain: Guerillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (1985) to show the local dependence of guerillas; and Norma Krieger's *Zimbabwe's Guerilla War: Peasant Voices* (1992) to suggest that coercion by guerillas of peasants outweighed cooperation between the two. Relations between cadres and peasants during the struggle can be indicative of relations between the state and government after liberation. Peasants alienated by the liberation process might not be sufficiently loyal to the new governments. This provoked more conflict. Moreover, in Angola and Zimbabwe rival nationalist movements continued to compete after liberation. The ultimate disappointment of these revolutionary movements was not, however, solely driven by ideological or disciplinary failings. Mozambique, Angola, and Zimbabwe faced South African and American opposition. In Angola's case Cuban forces took up the defense of the MPLA government.

The chapter also includes a history of the struggles in South Africa and, by extension, Namibia. These fit less snugly with the other cases because the white government was homegrown and opposition took root in urban civil society. Nugent gives a brisk and well-considered review of developments from the inauguration of apartheid in 1948 through the mid-1980s. Liberation movements forced into exile were eclipsed by youth and labor organizations. Conflict with the

obdurate government reached a crisis in 1986. Negotiations with the Cubans, Angolans, and South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) allowed the first release of pressure through Namibian independence, finalized in 1990.

By now it should be clear that this book does not range far beyond the high politics of the state. Nugent admits as much on the first page, when he notes that he originally had hoped to survey "political, economic, social and cultural themes," but he "ended up producing an account which is dominated by politics" (p. 1). To the author's credit, common people do elbow their way into the narrative now and then. These include women traders, young activists, popular singers, peasants in war zones, and religious adherents. But ordinary folk need to have an extraordinary interaction with the state to appear in the narrative. My students were aware of problems with this approach. They were dissatisfied that in this book "the subaltern subject is constituted only by its inclusion in politics." They knew there must be more to the story: "By focusing on the way state policies affect African populations, [Nugent] ignores the many ways in which African citizens have influenced their own development."<sup>[4]</sup>

One way to improve this approach would have been to engage more deeply with the cultural questions raised in the notable works of Jean-François Bayart (*The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* [1993]), Achille Mbembé (*On the Post-colony* [2001]), and Michael Schatzberg (*Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: Father, Family, Food* [2001]), who depict widely held notions of prowess and potency of rulers. For example, all these writers draw attention to the meaning of eating as a common sign and source of power in Africa. In political discourse, the eaten are consumed and the consumer gains ascendancy. Such shared symbols can elucidate the relationship between ruler and ruled. In the absence of this analysis, the reported cannibalism by Bokassa that Nugent men-

tions seems like random psychopathology without political meaning.

The take-no-prisoners form of politics in Nigeria creates another puzzlement. Several passages in the book give extended descriptions of the competition for control over the state, from the 1950s through the 1990s. It is clear that Nigerian politics are no place for the timid. "Bitter," "personal," and "fierce," they were "characterized by a refusal to accept limits to contestation. Any advantage was pressed home with a view to completely eliminating rivals" (pp. 30, 90, 91). Patronage networks were "Byzantine" and corruption was "spectacular" (pp. 220, 422). But why is the competition in Nigeria so extreme? Nugent's answer is historical, but only twentieth-century wheels turn this machine. According to this book, Nigeria's particularity developed through the entrenchment of indirect rule in northern Nigeria, uneven access to colonial education, hasty decolonization, the unfortunate effects of a three-state federation, ethnic aggression, the curse of oil, and increasing competition between Christianity and Islam. But are these reasons enough of an explanation for why Nigerian politics are played as a zero-sum game? What might we see if we looked toward the *longue durée* to discern deeper patterns of political behavior?

Despite these limitations, the virtuosity of the high political narrative draws the reader in. This book teaches the patient reader (or those forced to work through it for a class assignment) how to read it. After seven chapters and over three hundred pages, my students were feeling some suspense. After all, they had nearly reached the period of their lifetimes and history was far from over. They knew the end game involved immiseration, Bill Gates, Bono, and Tony Blair, but having worked through two-thirds of the book, they could not anticipate how the flawed yet afloat continent of the mid-1980s could become today's poster continent for disaster. It was precisely because Nugent's portrayal was of a fraught but rea-

sonable place that one woman commented: "It seems like a Greek tragedy. I have this feeling that no matter what they do, something terrible is going to happen to all these people." [5]

The climax comes in the eighth chapter, "Invasion of the Acronyms: SAPs, AIDs and the NGO Takeover," where Nugent most strongly reveals his analytical hand to describe how the continent collectively grew poorer and weaker and how it became a continent of crises. This development occurred in a particular moment when different foreign connections converged and closed off possibilities for autonomous innovation. Finally, Nugent unveils his theory about the force cementing the continent together.

"During the 1960s and 1970s, it was possible to argue that Africans were making their own choices, even if these were informed by current thinking within the burgeoning development industry. However, over the next two decades it often seemed as if the clock was being turned back. By the start of the 1980s, *virtually every African country* was manifesting signs of acute economic distress, reflected in a mounting and unsustainable debt burden, a permanent trade deficit and an acute fiscal crisis which meant that the state was unable to maintain basic infrastructure or fund essential social services" (p. 326, my emphasis).

At this point, a disclosure made in the introduction provides intellectual context. As a student at the University of Cape Town in the 1980s, Nugent "was reared" in dependency and underdevelopment theory (p. 5). But the awkward fit with specific local conditions distanced him from the theory. The first two-thirds of the book survey the political microenvironments that abnegate generalizations about dependency. In the last third of the book, on the 1980s and after, local variation and innovation matter less.

The account of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) is familiar but builds on earlier references to increasing debt and energy costs. The

neoliberal triumph in the United Kingdom and United States also figures in. The debate pitted those who thought there was too little capitalism inside the continent (neoliberals) against those who saw too much of it on the outside (structuralists). Foreign voices proclaiming the first position were the loudest and dictated prescriptions for healthier economic environments in each stricken country. This is a "reinscription" of the colonial contradiction.

Again, Nugent takes the question to the record of individual countries, choosing one that did comparatively well with SAPs and one that desperately needed some adjustments: Ghana and Tanzania. Both Tanzania and Ghana generally complied with SAPs, so the shortcomings cannot be blamed on implementation. Beginning in 1983, Ghana became a model of compliance, devaluing currency, dropping price controls, and cutting civil service. Happily, economic growth rates, the food supply, manufacturing, and the budget deficit all improved, but early success was not sustained. By the late 1990s, cheap imports and softening gold and cocoa prices choked both agricultural exports and industry. Corruption and borrowing increased. Nugent believes some interventions prevented widespread impoverishment but that the case of Ghana "demonstrates the stubborn persistence of all the interlocking constraints identified by the structuralists" (p. 341).

For its part, Tanzania was weakened and indebted after its implementation of rural socialism in the 1970s. The committed visionary Julius Nyerere resisted SAP prescriptions, but the country capitulated after his retirement. By the mid-1990s, Tanzania was ticking off the checklist for liberalization, but to what end? Growth was not so great and quality of life, as measured by access to health and education, was no better. All the while it was still borrowing and receiving aid. In wrapping up the discussion, Nugent delivers his strongest editorial. "At the start of the new millennium, the depressing reality was that Africa's position

within the global economy seemed destined to condemn the majority of its people to perpetual impoverishment" (p. 346). Here is Nugent's coming out as a structuralist. But in contrast to the *dependistas* of the 1980s, his conclusion suggests that the problem is too little—not too much—actual capitalism in the global economy. In earlier discussions, Nugent frequently points to the troubles brought by unstable prices for African-grown crops, but in the end northern subsidies to U.S. cotton growers and European sugar beet farmers earn strong words: "Free markets, it seems, were only for the poor" (p. 347).

As the national ability to make policy declined and national budgets shrunk, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) filled the breach, both international and local. The problems of channeling aid through NGOs that report to international rather than local stakeholders are clear.

My students were thrilled with the sections on SAPs and NGOs, as they draw the history of a continent out of intricate country studies. These sections explain why the tragedy had befallen all countries, despite many creative innovations and periodic successes. But at this point, when the continent emerged as a well-formed unit of analysis, high politics became much less interesting. When the state ceases to be a robust actor, it no longer holds our attention.

HIV-AIDS is the final acronym of the chapter. Nugent gives a useful summary of the transmission of the epidemic and efforts against it, but here the book softens. HIV infiltrated the continent along trade and labor migrancy routes, from cities to countryside. It spread between regions through violent displacement and military mobilization. The comparative building-block approach is not conducive to a description of its capillary effects. Instead, the narrative becomes a knock-on account following macro indicators, such as infection rates and expenditures. My students became more insistent with questions about everyday lives: What about the economic burdens

on households? What cultural forms have arisen during the scourge?

Questions about experiences continued to build. The penultimate chapter on "Democratization" discusses the political developments that grew out of the continentwide experience of structural adjustment. This chapter opens with reviews of general trends among three groups of nongovernmental actors: religious bodies, voluntary associations, and the media. Thereafter, it returns to the countries as building blocks, sorting them according to their paths through democratization. The categories multiply and become narrower and more formulaic. Nugent describes Lusophone states, then four categories of Francophone states (according to their experience of national conferences). Anglophone countries skipped the step of national convention, so he reviews them according to their history of referenda and elections: it takes seven categories to distill the trends of English-speaking Africa (including South Africa). In this final stretch, Nugent sweetens the daunting amount of information with flashes of wry humor, though skilled summaries of social science literature become rarer.

The nation-state resurfaces at the close of the book. Civil wars in Chad, Sudan, Angola, and the Horn were longstanding, but in the early 1990s warlordism and ethnic violence achieved horrific synergy in two spots: the Liberia-Sierra Leone-Côte d'Ivoire triangle and the Great Lakes. In both cases, Nugent usefully summarizes the transnational connections and ruthless leadership that drove the wars.

These final chapters will prove useful for readers who seek a primer on politics in the period. If any sub-Saharan country (not including the islands) escaped mention, I did not notice the absence. But for my seminar that followed the book as a whole, the questions that began with the depiction of HIV-AIDs continued. Once Nugent took away our reason to follow the trajectories of the high politics of individual countries, we began to

actively question the whereabouts of everyday folks and information about how they created their worlds. One of my students summarized the message as "African rulers didn't worry about rural masses, so you don't have to either." [6]

It is often said that weaknesses are misplaced strengths. The edifice Nugent constructs in eight and a half chapters establishes the importance of a history of high politics in postcolonial Africa, even while it demonstrates the limitations of such an approach. Ultimately, the book not only taught my students how to read it but also how to critique it, especially the last chapter and a half on the period of liberal ascendancy. Still, they were intrigued by the apology for the study of high politics. In a reflective conclusion on nation-states, reconciliation, and citizenship, Nugent suggests that declarations of the death of the African nation-state are premature. With understated and efficient observations, he reminds us of the power of the past and contingency of the future. The final paragraphs raise considerations of the possible influence of the intercontinental diaspora and drive us into fresh global considerations. This analysis offers an intriguing new consideration of the recent history of Africa.

In the introduction, Nugent explains some difficulties of writing recent "open" history, as opposed to the "completed" history of decolonization and the Cold War (pp. 1-2). Contemporary events fall in the domain of journalists, who do not necessarily make the best sense of events: "Often, their noses are pressed up too close to the events for them to be able to properly explain them. In the heat of the moment, certain ways of seeing an issue tend to hold sway, and it is only rather later that a greater sense of perspective becomes possible.... After some time has passed, the full range of possibilities tends to become apparent and one starts to hear voices that were drowned out at the moment in question" (p. 2). On the "completed" history, this historical study offers magisterial perspective. On the "open" history, it gives us rea-



son to wonder whether a magisterial perspective is what we need.

#### Notes

[1]. Martin Meredith, *The Fate of Africa: From Hopes of Freedom to the Heart of Despair: A History of Fifty Years of Independence* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005).

[2]. The students in the class who are not referenced elsewhere in this review were: Erin Adams, Oyindamola Adegboro, Kartik Akileswaran, Rob Ames, Sarah Bird, William Brennan, Colin Chazen, Ali Fairbrother, Jennifer Huswitt, Helen Lamphere, Kathleen Millar, Christina Sanabria, David Schwartz, Aaron Stanton, and Nikita Stefani. Allison Shutt of Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas, has also shared her experience of teaching this book.

[3]. Stephen Ellis, "Writing Histories of Contemporary Africa," *Journal of African History* 43 (2002): 10-11.

[4]. Gabriel Corens, Brown '07 (student paper, Brown University, November 3, 2006); and Ben Grin, Brown '07 (student paper, Brown University, November 3, 2006).

[5]. Ally Dick, Brown '07 (class discussion, Brown University, October 6, 2006).

[6]. Whitney Graham, Brown '09 (class discussion, Brown University, October 13, 2006).

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