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8 Africa at the century’s turn: South Africa, Rwanda, and beyond

April 1994. In that month, the planned extermination of Rwanda’s Tutsi population began, and South Africans of all colors and origins voted for the first time to select their government. This book began with these two events, which seemed to reveal Africa’s two futures: one of electoral democracy, the other of ethnic violence. Viewed statically, those labels convey hopes and fears in many parts of the continent. Viewed historically, they are inadequate, and this book has explored the past that has shaped this present.

Rwanda turns out to be one of the least culturally divided former colonies of Africa. Difference will not explain the genocide, nor will “ancient hatreds.” A particular historical trajectory was described in chapter 1: a history of inequality of power and wealth in the pre-colonial kingdom, of the ethnicization of difference under colonial rule, of growing tension as the possibility of African autonomy became clear, of Belgian indifference to anti-Tutsi violence as a Hutu-led government came to power. It is a history of that government’s inability to manage the politics of a gatekeeper state in the face of diminishing resources, of conflict with refugee Tutsi whose only recourse was to try to get access to the state on the battlefield, and of government officials and clients building a propaganda machine and militia organization to stir up hatred and prepare for the slaughter of Tutsi.

That story, even in schematic form, gets us closer to the still unfathomable process of how the leadership of a state could organize the killing of an entire category of its population and how many citizens could hack their neighbors – Tutsi and Hutu deemed moderate – to death with machetes and loot their belongings. It doesn’t begin to explain how the UN, democratic states in the rest of the world, and the Organization of African Unity allowed such an event to become imaginable, let alone to let it unfold. The genocide in Rwanda was unique in Africa; that is, slaughter intended to eliminate people categorized in a certain way was unique. But mass killings have not been, from the anti-Igbo pogroms that preceded the Biafran war of 1967 through the still ongoing brutality
of a Tutsi-led, minority government in Burundi against Hutu. Ethnic cleansing – including exemplary killing, rape, and destruction of houses and cattle to force people to leave a specific area – has occurred in parts of Kenya with the apparent connivance of the Moi regime; a brutal war by a northern-dominated regime, run as an Islamic state, against non-Muslim populations to the south has been going on in the Sudan for twenty-five years. The common thread here is not just “ethnicity,” for that is a label that glosses many different phenomena and processes, but a form of politics that makes an all-or-nothing struggle for inclusion or exclusion to access to state resources conceivable. In chapter 7, I argued that gatekeeper states are particularly at risk for this kind of excess, but even so sequences of decisions which human beings need not have made are responsible for turning tension into civil war or systematic murder.

Within the borders of post-1994 Rwanda, there has been no counter-genocide. Settlings of accounts against Hutu, raids by Hutu militia who had hidden themselves in neighboring Zaire/Congo, and coercive government attempts to concentrate rural populations into more easily monitored villages have continued. Rwanda has made progress in restoring basic institutions. What has not been done is to resolve the issue of responsibility in the genocide. Both international and national courts are at work, but seven years later neither has provided justice. In Rwanda, suspects rounded up for ill-defined reasons languish in squalid prisons alongside the most vicious killers. The thorniest question of all is how a Tutsi minority, the victim of a horrific attempted genocide, can feel secure if majority rule were restored.

Outside of Rwanda itself, the aftereffects of 1994 continued as massacres and war. The rebellion led by Kabila against Mobutu, supported by Rwanda and Uganda, engulfed Zaire in 1997. The Hutu – whether hostile militias or fearful refugees – were victims of atrocities by Kabila’s forces and the Rwandan army in Zaire, while Hutu militias continued bloody raids into Rwanda and sometimes Uganda. When a new rebellion erupted in eastern Congo against Kabila, Rwanda and Uganda – having broken with their ally – supported it, while Angola and Zimbabwe intervened against the rebels. All outside parties, and the Congo state, had interests in trafficking gold and diamonds, not just in protecting borders and supporting allies. The consequences of this regional war included thousands of deaths and the paralysis of a large region in dire need of reconstruction. All this testified to the unpredictable and horrific consequences of the collapse of state institutions, to the extent of cross-border networks, and to the ambiguity of the distinction between warlords seeking spoils and states defending borders.

And South Africa? If the problem were simply race, one could declare it solved. Apartheid is dead, and not just in the sense that a black president elected by all voters is head of state. The once-white universities have for years had a black majority among the students (but not the faculty); the desirable neighborhoods are no longer all-white; and corporations are hiring Africans into managerial positions and trying to make African capitalists part of the business world. The elite of South Africa is no longer exclusively white, and a substantial black middle and working class has access to decent salaries and pensions, but income inequality among black South Africans is amongst the highest within any population in the world. Still, the ending of apartheid means a great deal to the daily existence of even the most downtrodden: they no longer fear arrest or deportation to a barren “homeland” for walking down the street without required documents. What has proven most elusive since majority rule is ending the grinding poverty affecting so much of the black population.

Not long before 1994, a white South African with good leftist credentials told me that he feared South Africa would become another Nigeria. That a series of political and economic failings of states have been coded as “African” is the unstated premise of the remark, but the anxiety that it reveals about the possibility of a state coming under the control of a small group of gatekeepers is real enough. The variations recounted in chapter 7, from the extremes of Nigeria or Zaire to the abortive capitalist transition of Kenya, give little precedent for optimism. But one has to be careful about what – other than the fact of being African – the implicit comparison presumes.

There remains a fundamental difference. South Africa, in its brutal and racialized way, did effect a process of capitalist accumulation going beyond anything elsewhere on the African continent. This meant not just the extension of market relations – which have spread across the continent – but the monopoly of usable land and productive resources in the hands of a small number of property owners, their acting together in defense of property and competitively toward the accumulation of profits. In South Africa, a white elite’s control of land was mediated by the allocation of a small portion of land as “reserves” for Africans not actually at work. But since the massive urban expulsions of the 1950s to 1970s – building upon earlier expropriations in rural areas – those reserves have become dumping grounds, incapable of providing even modest support to families. African families with small amounts of land get little income from it; they rely on the wages remitted or pensions of relatives who have jobs, be they in legal or illegal sectors of the urban economy. Other African countries have landless people, but not the large majority of the once rural population. In Kenya, for example, most people “straddle,” combining
farming and wage resources in various sorts of ways, with varying degrees of success. Wage-labor capitalism, in most of Africa, takes place on islands in a sea of other sorts of socio-economic relations; in South Africa, wage-labor capitalism pervades the economy. And, therefore, the most salient fact regarding the economy of the post-apartheid state is that the unemployment rate is over 35 percent.

The unsettled question in South Africa is not whether it will remain capitalist or not. It is whether capitalism will be dynamic, growing, and open to the inclusion of new capitalists, rather than insular, parasitic, and exclusive. Balancing capitalists’ demands for investment and growth against workers’ (and nonworkers’) demands for security and opportunity, against the need to remedy the effects of bad schooling and living in homes without water, and against the cost of fighting AIDS are central issues facing the nation. There have been programs to build homes and improve services, but 73 percent of Africans in South Africa still live without tap water in their homes and 69 percent without electricity. The ANC government promptly made education compulsory and got 95 percent of school-age children into classrooms, but the quality of the facilities and the teachers, especially in the poorer districts, remains in doubt. So far the government has leaned toward reassuring investors and maintaining economic “discipline.”

But at least such issues can be talked about in South Africa without someone ending up in jail. Most encouraging – in comparison with what happened earlier elsewhere in Africa – the labor movement, COSATU notably, has refused to be absorbed into the ANC, although it has lost the influence over government policy it once had. The 1994 election did not come about because someone pronounced the magic words “electoral democracy”; and the strength of what can too easily be called “civil society” came from associations of neighborhood women, of factory workers, of high school students, of church members doing a lot of hard work in the crevices of an oppressive system for many, many years. It would be hard for the government, in the style of Sékou Touré or Nkrumah, to use the fiction of unity to insist that such organizations have no place in a liberated South Africa.

South Africa, for all its social inequities, has a chance to avoid two debilitating aspects of the gatekeeper state: the winner-take-all nature of competition for control of the state (the loser of an election in South Africa can still aspire to get rich), and the elimination of strong organizations capable of defending an open political system and a fair judiciary. It is not the strength of capitalism per se that fosters such possibilities; South Africa’s past shows that some forms of capitalism can develop via racial oppression and exploitation. In Kenya, Zimbabwe, and other states, a crony capitalism associated with the state uses mixtures of market, kinship, and authoritarian relations to keep out competition, aligning patron–client politics with monopolistic capitalism. But South African capitalism is neither monolithic nor uncontested. Social progress and equity will likely remain objects of mobilization and argument within a political culture that values its newly found freedoms. South Africa’s achievements and ongoing struggles are a reminder that it is the structural constraints of gatekeeper states and extraverted economies that have dashed hope elsewhere, not something inherent in being African.

Another pitfall, emphasized by Mahmood Mamdani, in his comparison of South Africa and “tropical” Africa, is that while supplanting racial divisions, liberation may retain “tribal” ones. Mamdani emphasizes that “tribe” in Africa means not just a sentiment, but institutions of authority, a reality that people must confront even if their sentiments pull them in different directions. In South Africa, Zulu migrant workers are particularly dependent – if they are to have any chance of maintaining ties to their rural home villages – on the patronage system established by Zulu chiefs and their political leader, Buthelezi. The question is whether ethnic entrepreneurs like Buthelezi can harness cultural difference into a powerful political force, something that in all parts of Africa has required hard work and favorable (or rather unfavorable) conditions. Buthelezi is the only “tribal” leader of pre-1994 South Africa to have kept sufficient distance from the apartheid regime’s efforts to avoid being discredited. More important, the intensity of urban–rural migration has spread urban youth culture widely in South Africa, crossing although not eliminating more local cultural traditions, and the deterioration of land has diminished the power of rural brokers; even Zulu are divided and often ambivalent, not necessarily ardent tribalists or captives of an ethnic demagogue. This is how the revolution of 1994 unfolded – matters too. The possibility of acting as citizens captured South Africans in 1994, Zulu included. Buthelezi, who initially wanted to boycott the election, had to accommodate himself to this reality and join the electoral process. South Africa’s constitution gives more autonomy to regional governments than do the systems of most African countries, and the fact that the ANC’s impressive national popularity is countered by slim provincial majorities for Inkatha in Natal-Kwazulu and for the National Party in the Western Cape gives opponents a stake in the system. The tensions remain but the mechanisms to contain them are in play. Institutions that strengthen associational life, debate, and public participation in decision-making could make a difference elsewhere in Africa, too.

Difficult issues remain about the relationship between South Africa’s universalistic, progressive constitution – one of the most rights-conscious
in the world — and its citizens’ perceptions of cultural difference and their desires for spaces of partial autonomy. Should the rights of women overrule particular groups’ “traditions” of patriarchy and marriage rules that give women unequal voice and access to resources? So far the answer is a qualified yes, but debates continue. The resolutions are not necessarily either/or. South Africa’s second election witnessed neither the spread of ethnic particularism nor a revival of “Africanist” politics, a quest for an entirely black nation, despite the fact that black poverty remains enormous and white privilege remains visible. The unanswered question is how much the government of Thabo Mbeki can address the basic issues of access to water, schooling, jobs, and a decent standard of living. The danger is less that South Africa will become another Nigeria than that it will become another Brazil, a large, potentially prosperous country, where the gap between rich and poor is enormous and the racial dimensions of inequality are kept in obscurity.

One can reverse the question: is there much chance that Nigeria’s future could come to resemble South Africa’s present? Can Nigeria obtain electoral democracy and chart a plausible, if uncertain, route to economic development? Writing in 2001, I can be more optimistic than I could have been in 1998, for after the unexpected death of Nigeria’s dictator Sani Abacha, a courageous general, Abdulsalam Abubakar released political prisoners from jail, eased press restrictions, and eventually superintended a relatively fair election in which he was not himself a candidate. But can a state with a forty-year history of conflict, oppression, and corruption, transform itself by the accident of a clot in one ruler’s coronary artery and an act of will by his successor? Will the resources of the oil spigot be used for purposes other than patronage and elite consumption? Will Nigerians’ entrepreneurial skills, much in evidence for many decades, be used in diverse agricultural units, in industrial projects, and in small-scale marketing free of state harassment? Will unions, trade associations, and professional bodies be able to develop themselves and represent different points of view? And will government itself be decentralized enough so that meaningful political organizing, with real resources to use and distribute, can take place at municipal, regional, provincial levels?

One needs to remember that the gatekeeper state is neither a choice made by current political actors nor an automatic response to a given situation in terms of the world economy or the global system of states. Such states — with their considerable range of effectiveness, repressiveness, openness to countervailing pressures — are the product of an historical process.

The constraints and possibilities of that history have been the subject of this book. Africa was systematically conquered but not so systematically ruled. The pre-1940 colonial system was able to function because it had limited transformative ambitions. Colonial power was a combination of gatekeeping, bastion building, and the state’s effort to make itself into the patron of patrons, particularly of chiefly elites who brought coercion and the distribution of rewards to the village level. But chiefs and commoners found numerous niches and crevices in the system. Trading diasporas, labor migration networks, associations of school graduates, churches, mosques, and shrines cut across tribal cages and territorial borders, even as islands of wealth and influence developed among cash crop producers in various regions.

By the 1940s, the reality of Africans in dynamic agricultural systems, in wage labor, and in cities could not be contained within this system of rural power and patronage. The preservationalist colonialism of the 1930s became the developmentalist colonialism of the 1940s and 1950s. Ironically, the radical claims of developmentalist colonialism — that it would revolutionize the backward ways of African economies, creating a new African as much as new wealth — translated into a focus on those more bounded areas of the economy that the state could in fact remake. The state revenue base remained shallow, export-oriented, and vulnerable to the vagaries of the world economy. Politically, the developmentalist state undermined provincial and chiefly administration and became more centralized: representatives of the state claiming technical and bureaucratic knowledge, rather than white men who “knew their natives” or chiefs who knew their traditions, tried to rule the countryside.

The constraints of the post-colonial era were not those of “colonialism” per se, but of an entire process, including the form of African political and social mobilization. This was true in a double sense. First, the shift in the colonial state towards an activist, centralizing, modernizing direction presented a particular target to the budding nationalists of the 1950s: the possibility of an activist, centralizing, modernizing national project. National officials often partook of the same arrogance toward peasants and small-scale marketeers as their predecessors, but they were more concerned with the implications of development for patron-client relations, with providing resources to people loyal to them and keeping resources away from potential opponents. Second, the first generation of leaders knew from their own experience the potential of claims made on the basis of citizenship. The reformist colonialism of France and Great Britain had been beset by demands — for equal wages, equal social services, and an equal standard of living — based on a notion (explict or implicit) of imperial citizenship; their successors faced such demands from mobilized groups on a national level, and they had more meager resources with which to meet them. Efforts by African states to augment the vertical
relationships they could control and to undercut people who could make claims upon them or develop autonomous power bases added a new dimension to the bastion-making, controlling, and gatekeeping qualities of the late colonial state. Subsequent generations of leaders were caught up in competition for control of the gate itself.

Not the least of the losses dating from the 1970s has been the national imagination: an excitement once found in many parts of the population as colonial rule collapsed, as national institutions and symbols seemed to express a sense of people controlling their own destiny. Although protests calling for the accountability of rulers to citizens can still be heard, national ideals are at times replaced by a bitter sense of betrayal and of the necessity of finding a patron inside the governing elite who can send some of the fruits of the gatekeeper state in one’s direction. Or people have focused their collective imaginations on neighborhoods and religious affiliations, on kinship relations and on other sorts of personal ties. Such affinities had been important all along. But for a time, claims could be made as citizens, in the name of common interest. The very process of claim-making had helped to define a national imaginary. The repressive actions of African leaders, starting with Nkrumah, not only damaged associational life and expression, but the very national ideal which the leaders themselves asserted.

Those leaders inherited from colonial powers the institutions of state, even if not the spirit of the nation: bureaucracies, armies, customs houses. The nation-state gave leaders access to international resources. Heads of state could draw on the intellectual, moral, and financial resources of the United Nations, international financial organizations, and the development agencies of industrial states, who were concerned with making the international system at least minimally functional. Rulers like Mobutu proved skilled in manipulating Cold War and other rivalries. Whereas state elites tried to guard the gate, regionalist movements, smuggling networks, and rebels tried to get around it, and the complexities of international business and rivalries of nations, as well as the possibilities of cross-border networks within Africa, made gate evasion a feasible possibility, at least if the rebels had resources worth buying. What was crucial was the struggle to control the nodes in a pattern of resource movement.

The gatekeeper state thus emerged out of a peculiar history of decolonization, itself a product of the desire of European powers to work with African states of limited size and influence, of the first generation of independent leadership to consolidate the political apparatuses they had built up in the late colonial years, and of the limited imaginations of all concerned. The peculiar history of decolonization, for better or worse, gave rise to a series of states which stood at critical junctures in a highly unequal world.

The question of constraint becomes more difficult if one asks the counterfactual question of whether in the absence of activist state projects, colonial and post-colonial, more dynamic forms of capitalism could have emerged. The most likely answer is, with great difficulty. It is not clear that the goose which gatekeeper states killed was capable of laying golden eggs; indeed, the obstacles facing capitalist development within a capitalist world economy were themselves an important reason why state leaders tried to find other means of expanding national wealth. Even before colonialization, Africa presented unfertile ground for capitalist expansion. It offered many places where people could survive and if necessary hide; it offered closely woven social networks that could foster movement across certain routes and solidarity in certain places; and it offered relatively few places where an elite could try to exclude all others from access to crucial assets – notably land – and thereby create a permanent workforce subordinated to their task. African kings had themselves faltered in their quest to turn power into systematic extraction from their own populations and had looked to external connections – trade, conquest, and enslavement – to set themselves apart. The would-be capitalists of the colonial era, with the notable exception of South Africa, were only a little more thorough. They could build islands of wage-labor capitalism, and mostly had to live off less direct extraction from peasants who were both spread out geographically and connected to each other socially. Colonial capitalism focused on the extraction of a few commodities and on the building of narrow commercial structures, not on wide and inclusive commercial interaction or diversified and long-term investment.

The rulers of independent Africa found themselves in the same bind, so that their takeover of the development project of late colonialism also failed to produce systematic transformation of production and exchange, but instead reinforced narrow channels which the would-be rulers could try to control and much larger areas which they could not. By then, countries exporting primary products faced an international economy dominated by powerful corporations with a wide choice around the world of where they could find primary products, cheap labor, and investment opportunities.

From the late 1940s through the 1960s, expanding crop and mineral exports plus development efforts in their most expansive phase seemed for a time to promise more varied economies. Some cash crop producers, despite the tendency of states to confiscate a significant portion of export earnings, acquired significant wealth. The best organized workers
achieved better wages and the possibility that a career could provide a family with a decent house, education for the next generation, and a pension.

These hopes fell victim to world economic trends that turned viciously against primary product exporters in the 1970s and 1980s. But even in the best years of export growth, few African countries got much beyond increased primary product exports and import substitution industrialization; and the most successful, such as the Côte d’Ivoire, still faced steep declines later on. Neither the most market-oriented African economies nor the most nationally focused achieved notable breakthroughs, even if for a time many were able to finance substantial improvements in education, health, and other basic services. Internally, African states had already run into the limitations posed by gatekeeper elites who feared both the claim-making capabilities of organized farmers and workers and the danger that pockets of wealth could produce regionally based opposition. Small-scale entrepreneurs, from market women to cross-border traders, were often harassed by African governments, as they had been by colonial regimes, unless they could be incorporated into the leadership’s patron-client structure.

Such restrictiveness contradicted governments’ desire to promote economic activity in their national territories, and the balance between these tendencies varied greatly. But the absence of long-term trends toward the emergence of strong business communities and the reversal of the 1950s pattern of developing a stable, decently paid labor force reflected back on the political process itself, making politics more of a winner-take-all situation, where both wealth and power depended on keeping control of the central government. Local and regional government were discouraged, leaving little space for those out of power to retain a stake in the system independent of the patron-client system. States discouraged the activities of civic as well as political organizations, from unions to women’s associations to organizations advocating ecologically responsible development.

This historical sequence, a limited opening followed by a narrowing of political and economic possibilities, trapped African states in a vicious circle: the resources of the gate had to be all the more protected because resources were so limited. Such a situation encouraged intrigue — in the army, among regional power-brokers — to take over the all-important institutions attached to sovereignty and the linkage with the outside world. The rash of coups d’état of the late 1960s in Africa revealed the extent of the problem; the Congo crisis and the Biafran war indicated the extremes to which it could go. The diamond-smuggling warlords of Sierra Leone and Angola reveal how prevalent struggles to evade gatekeeping authority remain at the dawn of a new century, while Moi’s Kenya and Mugabe’s Zimbabwe continue to illustrate the economic failures and disillusioning politics that even long-lasting gatekeeper states entail. Some gatekeeper states possess civil services and state institutions that function moderately well, allow a degree of debate and civic organization, and more rarely — as in Senegal in 2000 — allow open enough politics for an incumbent leader to be defeated and to accept defeat. In quite a few states, including Kenya, Senegal, and Nigeria, the media and public debate are becoming more open. In a number of countries, the weakening of state economic control, under pressures of structural adjustment and leaders’ realization of their own policy failures, has led to expanding entrepreneurial possibilities, misleadingly labeled “informal,” and that has produced a rather different sort of market economy from that imagined in the 1960s; one where women traders and artisans play a bigger role and male wage workers a smaller one. At the other extreme, some regimes have become little more than the most powerful warlord among others, each trying to keep together a set of followers and reward them with the spoils of certain export revenues or from predation against the citizenry.

Is there a way out to get beyond the historical sequence that produced the limited possibilities and the horrific dangers of the gatekeeper state? Here, first, are some false ways out, the kind of one-size-fits-all solutions to Africa’s problems that are often imposed on the continent:

1 Privatize as much as possible, shrink the state, and let the market work its magic.

Markets certainly have their virtues, but they are specific ones: markets are institutions, systems of power, and personal networks whose effects can only be understood by examining them in all their specificity. It is not clear now, any more than it was in the 1940s, that the rag-tag army of the miserably employed has much to offer to Africa’s future, that Africa can achieve a breakthrough merely by making exports for which demand is weak a little bit cheaper, or that reducing government expenditures might not hurt the long-run expansion of human capital via, above all, education.

2 Let’s get serious about African capitalism. Perhaps an African capitalist class should kick peasants off the land and create a capitalist economy that will grow, prosper, and employ everybody.

The problem here is that at best this would produce a nineteenth-century proletariat for the twenty-first century and at worst leave only the pain, oppression, violence, and insecurity of other capitalist transitions without producing the benefits. Such a tendency is hardly compatible with building states with stable, democratic, and legitimate governments: people do not vote to be expropriated.
3 Give up on the rest of the world: build an economy, national or regional, with minimal outside connections; make African economic life an expression of Africa’s uniqueness.

Africa’s experiments with economic nationalism – import substitution industrialization, state corporations in key sectors of the economy – have gone badly. Uncompetitive, insulated producers are inefficient and their products expensive; it is the poor who bear the burden.

Are there more constructive ways of broaching the reform question? Here are some suggestions, not for prepackaged solutions, but for historically based ways of thinking about the future:

1 First, to think realistically, we need explanations. It may be true that most African states are ineffective, prone to corruption, and follow unsound economic policies, but such observations mean little without explanation. Gatekeeper states in fact have something to fear from networks or collectivities able to pose a challenge or from African cultivators who use social connections to make the state irrelevant. This leaves the question of whether certain kinds of policies by governments or outside institutions can encourage “going with the flow” – taking advantage of social systems that keep options open – instead of imposing yet another single-minded solution. We might do well to think about the small-scale cocoa producer in the Côte d’Ivoire and the market women of Ghana, about the ways in which urban wage-earners invest their savings in rural communities. What can states and outside agencies do to encourage such processes?

2 We need to think more subtly than the opposition of state and market or of a dichotomy between state and civil society. Some political economists have pointed out that keeping a market economy functioning requires more state capacity than maintaining a centralized economy; the latter may work badly, but it functions in the interests of the rulers. Shrinking government may do less to shrink the capacity of bad rulers to steal than to weaken the basic institutions that permit workforces to be trained and to stay healthy, or to provide the predictable services which domestic and foreign investors need. Patronage politics blurs the line between public and private resources and depends on the vertical relationship of an elite and the individuals and groups which make up society; privatizing ownership may redirect rather than reduce the importance of patronage. Indeed, all systems contain mixtures of personal connections and institutions that play by a set of rules. The problem is to make institutions rule-bound and transparent enough that all citizens can obtain services or make claims upon them, while avoiding their becoming distant and alienating. Rejecting the state in the name of civil society or the market is likely to be no more effective than assuming that the state can solve all problems in the name of the people. All this requires careful attention to the institutional capacity of states; it requires thinking in the long term. Whatever the failings of African governments that claimed to be “socialist” – and which were typically variations on the gatekeeper state – a democracy that is not in some sense “social” will garner little support. Voters need to sense that their decisions will bring them predictable services and opportunities that improve their lives.

3 We need to ask what are the implications of the fact that “African” problems are actually Euro-Afro-American co-productions, emerging from a history that included the slave trade, colonization, and international support for rulers like Mobutu. In the literal sense, the indebtedness of African countries, and in a more figurative sense, the accumulation of bad habits and the failure to solve basic problems, the burden of this co-production lies heavily on Africa. We are caught in a dilemma: on the one hand is the fact that young Africans are saddled with the multiple costs of the illegitimate rulers who built up big debts and bad structures. On the other hand, the writing off of debt encourages irresponsibility. The international system recognizes the latter danger, but not the former; even Mandela’s and Mbeki’s South Africa is expected to pay the debts the apartheid state incurred to oppress its African population. If a new generation of Africans is to get out of the difficulties their elders – with lots of help from outside – got them into, all of us need to take a more balanced view of responsibility. Let us realize that international banking, transnational corporations, donor agencies, and international institutions are not some impersonal embodiment of the “world economy” but are specific institutions, particular kinds of power relations, and they should be scrutinized just as carefully as the behavior of African politicians. International corporations and foreign aid can help or harm; they – not just the behavior of Africans – deserve examination. Africa has been told endlessly what it should do to conform to the world market; the more difficult question is how the institutions which constitute the world market can be restructured to give the world’s poor and excluded more of a chance.

4 From the days of anti-slavery movements to opposition to colonial rule to mobilization against apartheid, successful political action has depended on the resonance between the concerns of “local” people and their networks of supporters in other regions and in other countries. Such connections have turned slavery, colonialism, and racial domination from facts of life into political impossibilities. Political change does not come simply from do-good outsiders getting their way or from authentic local communities bringing down the all-powerful. Time and time again,
change has happened by interaction. Africa has its scoundrels who speak in its name and its thoughtful critics who were the first to warn that governments were failing to live up to their promises, well before western journalists and academics made their transition from credulous to judgmental. Outsiders need to know the difference: to listen and to think about what they hear. The future of purely “western” intervention is likely to be no better than its past, but the prospects of thoughtful cooperation remain open. As the experience of past cross-national social movements makes clear, the possibility that large-scale institutions can be changed is not entirely a utopian one.

Africa, under colonial rule or independent administration, has not had the opportunity to develop multiple, diverse, and dense economic linkages to the rest of the world. Its conquerors wanted certain things from Africa, and they constructed an infrastructure and incentives for them to be delivered. Faced with these forms of colonialism and capitalism, Africans struggled to hold them at arm’s length. They had considerable success and paid a frightful price for it. Are Africa’s choices between the poverty of marginalization and the devastation of exploitation? Or are there other ways to organize agricultural production, small-scale industry, and regional markets? Are the moments, from the 1940s to the 1990s, when Africans demanded the benefits of citizenship, doomed to be fleeting, as rulers fearful of the tenuousness of their own power repress forms of association and communication that might counter their singular hold on limited political and economic resources? Or do the experiences Africans have had over the past fifty years in forging associations and alliances among themselves, of imagining new forms of religious, cultural, and political action, offer possibilities for the future?