

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises* (Dakar: CODESRIA, Book Series, 1997).

A citizen of Malawi and graduate of Dalhousie University in Canada, economic historian by trade—author of a critically-acclaimed, two-volume *A Modern Economic History of Africa*¹—currently director of African Studies at the University of Illinois, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza is a man of many talents. He is a true African Renaissance man and Honnête Homme du 21^{ème} siècle. Novelist, essayist and literary critic, Zeleza also ventures effortlessly into many other disciplines such as history, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, economics and political science, as his erudite and massive *Manufacturing African Area Studies and Crises*—comprising no less than 23 chapters, 531 pages of text and some 2,000 bibliographic entries—amply demonstrates.

Yet in spite of his impressive literary and academic achievements and substantial publication record, Zeleza was, until recently, relatively unknown in Africanist circles. This was due to a conjunction of factors: his versatility and multidisciplinary nature (making it difficult to "pigeon-hole" him in any particular discipline), his relative geographically eccentricity—evolving as he was first in African universities, then in the rarified atmosphere of Canadian African studies, and the fact that his Dakar-based publisher, CODESRIA, is not widely distributed outside of Africa. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the November 1995 Orlando annual meeting of the United States-based African Studies Association was the first one he ever attended. Inspired by the debate around Philip Curtin's controversial piece "Ghettoizing African History"² and the related session on "Ghettoizing African Studies," Zeleza resolved to address head-on the question of representation in the study of Africa and concluded that Africanist discourse—by which he means "the entire intellectual enterprise of producing knowledge based on a western epistemological order in which both educated Africans and non-Africans are engaged," (p. v)—was most definitely in crisis. It is thus around this organizing concept that the author undertook to assemble a

¹ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *A Modern Economic History of Africa* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1997).

² Philip Curtin, "Ghettoizing African History," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 1995.

selection of his writings scattered among various publications over the last fifteen years (1982 to 1997). *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises* consists of five sections, each a cluster of the epistemological issues that have dominated African studies in the last decades as filtered through the author's personal and generational encounters with the field, namely: academic freedom; African historiography; colonial and post-colonial development ideologies and strategies; traditional and contemporary types and processes of democratization; and the cultural and political dimensions of Pan-Africanism. Methodologically, Zeleza first seeks to "deconstruct the discursive architecture of African studies" in general and in the various disciplines, then to "reconstruct alternative narratives," especially with respect to development and democracy (p. iv). What follows is an attempt to summarize the author's main argument and to assess the extent to which he has succeeded in his ambitious and worthwhile undertaking.

While the African state is largely responsible for the lack of academic freedom in Africa, says Zeleza, the Africanist academic community (including Western-based Africanists and African expatriate scholars) share responsibility "for generating many of the restrictive practices and processes that presently characterize the social production of knowledge in, and on, Africa" (p. 10). In an intriguing allegory (chapter one), Zeleza describes the trials and tribulations of a quintessential "academic tourist", a world-renowned, widely published and extensively traveled Canadian Africanist scholar who, on the occasion of his retirement, was publicly exposed by some of his former African students as a fraud and a plagiarist who had no qualms in appropriating his students' works as his own (could this be a damning and thinly-disguised indictment of one of Zeleza's own professors at Dalhousie University? *Cherchez le professeur...*). In the following chapters, the author highlights the predicament of the African expatriate scholar working in African and overseas universities (a category in which himself and the present author squarely fall), forced to migrate for reasons of personal security and intellectual integrity, as the increasingly authoritarian African post-colonial state could no longer tolerate the critical analyses of the pitfalls of nationalism coming out of the relatively sheltered sanctum of academia. There is no gainsaying the fact that the brain drain to Northern—and singularly North American—academic institutions

"has sapped Africa of its intellectual resources and increased the continent's dependence on western expatriates..." (p. 20).

As Zeleza rightly observes the relationship between African intellectuals and the state has been complex and contradictory, characterized by both collaboration and contestation. Indeed, "relations between the state and the intellectuals increasingly turned sour as the problems of nation-building and development proved far more intractable than originally anticipated" (p. 26), and as the intellectuals became increasingly radicalized as a result of the crisis of developmentalism. More significantly, there emerged a foreign donor-driven "intellectual division of labor between African and Africanist social scientists in which the former concentrate on narrow empirical studies of their societies and communities that the Africanists collect and process into 'micro' syntheses wrapped in currently fashionable theoretical packages" (p. 35). Such division of labor is clearly reflected in two major—and competing—African historiographical projects: the 8-volume *UNESCO General History of Africa* (1981-1993), and the 8-volume *Cambridge History of Africa*. While the *General History*—hailed by Zeleza as "one of the greatest achievements in historical scholarship this century" (p. 149)—is rooted in the Pan-African tradition, promotes a continental view (by treating Africa as one historical unit) and trans-Atlantic vision of African history, was edited and written mostly by African historians, and is available in abridged versions for classroom use, the *Cambridge History* is a perfect opposite of all of the above. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that "the *General History* provoked furor in some Africanist quarters because it threatened to overturn the international division of intellectual labor under which African historians narrowly concentrated on their ethnic groups, and at most on their nations, while western scholars provided regional and continental syntheses" (p. 149).

Ultimately, "the struggles for Academic freedom by African intellectuals are part of a much larger battle for democracy currently taking place in Africa" (p. 40), a battle which should include the gendering of African history and African studies in which the voices of African women themselves must be heard. In this regard, argues Zeleza, the question of language is central to understanding the nature and dynamics of the prevailing inequality between the Western

Africanist centers and the African academic community. The privileging of English and French—to the detriment of African languages—in academic knowledge production in Africa means that the continent's peoples, societies, and histories are interpreted in languages and discourses framed by concepts rooted in a Western epistemological order (p. 52, a point to which the author eloquently returns on p. 499). It also means that with their steadily deteriorating research infrastructures (including libraries and computer facilities), African academics are severely handicapped in the manufacturing and distribution of scholarly knowledge and information through publications.

Zeleza correctly notes that the "ideology of developmentalism" has its roots in the 1945 *Colonial Development and Welfare Act*. The *Act* was an attempt by the British imperial state to address the severe economic and political post-world war crisis in the African colonies while safeguarding the interests of metropolitan and local capitalism. This resulted in sowing the seeds for the development of the African national bourgeoisie. And the "agrarian crisis" that afflicted some African countries in the 1970s and 1980s was apparently due more to the misguided policies—that have their root in the colonial period. As Zeleza correctly points out, the agrarian crisis was a mere symptom of a much wider economic and social crisis confronting many African countries in the 1970s and 1980s which was itself an outcome of the world economic crisis that erupted in the early 1970s. Ultimately, concludes Zeleza, the ideology of developmentalism appears as a mere smokescreen for the unabashed capitalist accumulation relentlessly pursued by the African bourgeoisie in alliance with Western imperialist interests—under the cover of the international financial institution's structural adjustment programs (SAPs)—to the detriment of the ever-exploited and dependent African masses. It is noteworthy in this regard that one of the main policy prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund/World Bank inspired SAPs is the lifting of labor regulations, standards, and institutions that hamper the smooth functioning of the labor market. This thereby hinders development in general and employment growth in post-independence Africa—whose rate of wage employment declined markedly. In the last analysis, concludes Zeleza, the African economic crisis, compounded by the negative impact of the SAPs, led to a severe deterioration in the

conditions of living of the African masses, manifested most vividly in rising unemployment and falling wages (p. 368).

In part four of the book entitled "Imagining Democracy," Zeleza examines various dimensions of the unfolding democratic processes in Africa, namely: traditional African democratic systems of governance; authoritarian rule and censorship in Malawi; progress and problems of democratic transition in various African countries; visions of the post-colonial state and society and of democracy emanating from various African writer's novels, notably those of Ama Ata Aidoo, Ayi Kwei Armah, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Nuruddin Farah, Ben Okri, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. What emerges from this broad overview is a vivid and telling picture of political decay. It includes state failure and non-development, authoritarian, self-seeking and corrupt political elites; and, in spite of all this, the hope and dreams "for a redeemed humanity in a reformed social order, one in which there is democracy and freedom for all" (p. 475).

In the concluding section of the book entitled "Towards Panafrican Studies," Zeleza tackles the fundamental issues of cultural imperialism, Eurocentrism and the need for a Pan-African revival. In a probing and nuanced critique of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), the author observes that while Said's critique of Eurocentrism is apposite, his mastery of the African literature cited in support of his argument is far from impressive; and by reaffirming the primacy of the western canon, "he returns to singing praises for the every canon he once denounced so passionately" (p. 491). In the next chapter Zeleza addresses the vexing question of the paradigmatic crisis in social sciences, and the attendant rise of post-modernism in academia. How has research in (and out) of Africa contributed to the construction, consumption, and dissolution of western social science epistemology and knowledge? This is the question variously addressed by R.H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe and Jean O'Barr's *African and the Disciplines* (University of Chicago Press, 1993) and Kwame A. Appiah's *In my father's house* (Oxford University Press, 1992). Zeleza takes to task the first three authors for their failure to acknowledge or engage the work of African scholars and for merely offering "the pathologization of African economic and political behavior and processes" (p. 498) to economics and political science. In an attempt to reconsider African identities in the contemporary world—and in marked contrast to the Afrocentric

school, Appiah "celebrates the diversity, complexity, richness, and contingency of African social and cultural life" (p. 504) and argues passionately for the instruction of a new Pan-Africanism transcending inter-state relations. Returning to the latter theme in the concluding chapter, Zeleza focuses on a crucial question: "What is the basis of a Pan-African identity?" (p. 513). Using two of his own short stories (*Waiting* and *Homecoming*) to illustrate his argument, the author emphasizes the point that "recalling and reclaiming our histories is [sic] a prerequisite to any serious project of emancipation and liberation..." (p. 512) and tries to grapple with "difficult questions about Pan-Africanism as a construct and a movement, in its spatial dimensions and cultural content, political and ideological agendas" (p. 513). In the process, he raises some important issues such as the need to mobilize domestic constituencies that serve the interests of African peoples; the need for Pan-Africanism to find an appropriate response to the current globalization and regionalization of the world economy; and the need for a Pan-African economic agenda (pp. 516-17).

As indicated above, *Manufacturing African Studies* is a massive and erudite work in which Zeleza critically addresses fundamental philosophical, epistemological, methodological and theoretical issues pertaining to Africanist production and circulation of knowledge in the social sciences and humanities. Resorting to various *genres* and straddling many disciplines, his work might at first appear disconcerting to the typical Africanist solidly grounded in a single discipline. Yet it is precisely the sheer breadth and variety of this work that makes it so original and unique. Admittedly, very few scholars would be able to tackle a work of this range and magnitude, as Zeleza does so effortlessly and competently. The fact that the author started out as a writer—he completed his first collection of short stories at the tender age of 19, while a student in Malawi—probably accounts for his elegant (sometimes even flowery) prose and perfect mastery of the English language. Zeleza's frequent incursions into political science result in perceptive and nuanced analyses of African democracy movements and processes, and valuable insights—such as his correct observation that state and society in Africa "are not binary opposites...but intimately connected structural and moral spaces and spheres of action and reaction..." (p. 393). Anyone familiar with the situation prevailing in Africa would agree with his analysis of the

authoritarian nature of the state and of the attendant lack of academic freedom which conforms to the observable reality. Finally, unlike most of his Africanist colleagues, the author demonstrates an exceptional empathy for the plight of the marginalized and disenfranchised African masses (urban poor and peasantry) and of African women who remain largely invisible or misrepresented in Africanist social sciences and humanities.

Admittedly, a work of this scope and magnitude cannot be without blemish. To begin with, it suffers from the usual flaws inherent in this *genre*. Being a patchwork of various types of writings—scholarly articles, book reviews, literary critiques, short stories and public lectures—spanning fifteen years, the book obviously lacks unity and coherence and unavoidably leads to frequent and tedious repetitions (as for instance in the case of the question of language, dealt with in a full section of chapter 4, pp. 51-53, but also in chapter 22, pp. 498-9). Furthermore, Zeleza often lapses into the coded post-modernist jargon that he so rightly and consistently denounces throughout the book—frequently resorting to such favorite words as "agency", "deconstruct," "reconstruct," "discourse," "narrative," and "metascript." In addition, the author's cultural predisposition and linguistic bias leads him to blatantly ignore the abundant, rich and various Francophone African literature on the various themes tackled in the book. At times, Zeleza's well-founded criticism of Western ethnocentricity leads him to dubious assertions, such as the following: "Often in Western universities, African novels are regarded more as academic travelogues, used in social science courses as windows into the African social and cultural worlds than as literary pieces or aesthetic creations" (p. 432). But what is wrong with such an approach—of which I have been guilty myself—given the fact that such novels can be considered both as "windows" and aesthetically pleasing literary pieces (a point acknowledged by the author himself when he highlights the explicit political messages contained in many African novels such as those of Ayi Kwei Armah or Ngugi wa Thiong'o)? In addition, Zeleza's own "narrative" is not immune to contradictions. Thus, he adheres to Kwame Appiah's, view that "Africans are not molded from the same clay of racial and cultural homogeneity," approvingly quoting him when he says "we do not have a common traditional culture, common languages, a common religious

or conceptual vocabulary...we do not even belong to a common race" (p. 504). Evidently, such a position totally contradicts the Pan-African ideal that he enthusiastically endorses in the next chapter (23) in which the essential cultural unity of Africa (as documented in Cheikh Anta Diop's writings) is emphasized. This raises a more general and fundamental issue, namely that of Zeleza's ideological and political stance. Evidently coming from a strong Marxist political economy tradition tempered by just the right measure of Africanity, the author systematically and effectively critiques the Eurocentricity of Western social science epistemology. Yet at the end of the day one is not sure which ideological stance he adopts and which political strategy he favors beyond his rather vague and perfunctory advocacy of Pan-Africanism in the concluding chapter.

Be that as it may, when all is said and done, *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises* is without a doubt an academic *tour de force*. It is a work of broad scope and vision and of impressive erudition, rich in analytical, methodological and theoretical insights, appropriately critical of the dominant social science paradigms, yet refreshingly candid and thought-provoking. As such, it most certainly deserves pride of place in any Africanist's library.

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