

Review Essay

Robert Guest's *The Shackled Continent: Africa's Past, Present & Future* (Pan MacMillan, London, 2004)

Reviewed by J. Ford

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How do the vast majority of Australians perceive modern Africa and its peoples, its many problems and possibilities?

We depend largely on the capacity of non-African observers, writers and commentators to shed light on the Dark Continent. If Africa is *The Shackled Continent*, to what extent are those who (like the author) attempt to raise and explain African issues to us, themselves bound to a particular, despairing, largely negative viewpoint, one that does not just describe but actually perpetuates some of the shackles? *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Alan Paton's classic novel of South Africa's early *apartheid* years, ends with a dawn execution, and with asking when that other dawn will come, of release from the fear of bondage and the bondage of our fears. Will there be a prolonged dawn that releases Africa not only from some of its real and acute problems, but from the mind-forged manacles of widespread global perceptions of Africa as an homogenous, disease and conflict-ridden continent, beyond hope and relief, perpetually in crisis?

This ambitious book attempts to explain in simple terms many significant African social, economic and political issues, and boldly offers practical solutions to some of these. The author, Robert Guest, is Africa editor of *The Economist* and was for some years a correspondent in Africa. He was responsible for *The Economist* Special Survey 'How to Make Africa Smile' (a survey of sub-Saharan Africa, January 2004), on which the book is evidently based.

I felt a certain defensive reaction, at first, to yet another highly critical account of everything African. I am by no means alone in believing that one of Africa's most difficult obstacles is that of image, and of representations, and the external perceptions portrayals and the attitudes that these engender. Democratic and economic success stories in Africa – of which there are many, particularly recently – tend not to receive international coverage or consideration.

However, I completed the book by and large persuaded by Guest's core arguments about both the causes and some of the 'cures' of Africa's problems. More significantly, perhaps, I also felt convinced that, while despair is perhaps the worst of all deceits, while there is much that is promising and positive about modern Africa, and while outsiders' negative perceptions of Africa require some correction, it is probably the case that critical (indeed, almost sarcastic accounts, such as Guest's) are more important than ever. Africa's problems will not be properly addressed until more people of influence speak so frankly.

As an Afro-optimist, then, and someone who regrets the dark images usually associated with such a colourful, complex, vibrant, anything-is-possible continent, I was surprised to find myself somewhat persuaded by Guest, and in agreement with his insistent refusal to 'spin' Africa in a more favourable fashion. Worse still, in a time when I have felt inclined to side with those that triumph the dawn of a new Africa, was to read the cold truth of much of Guest's comments.

Africa's problems are, in their broad representation, as familiar as the sun. Africa (it is wrong but inevitable here that one speaks of the continent as if it were for all purposes a homogenous whole) is the only continent to have grown poorer in the last thirty years. Half of all sub-Saharan Africa's 600 million plus people subsist on less than 65 US cents or less a day. As Guest notes, the average African country has an annual GDP of only US\$2 billion, 'roughly the output of a small town in Europe'. Nearly half of Africa's privately held wealth is held offshore. Parts of Africa are struggling against the HIV/AIDS epidemic (and high level African denials of this), and while many older conflicts have died down, many rage on. The number of casualties of the civil wars in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo is equivalent to a September 11 tragedy having taken place every day for the past few years. Fellow African leaders are notoriously and pointlessly reluctant to use established forums in order to bring political pressure on their errant, negligent or downright homicidal peers.

The book is an uncompromising attempt to grapple with the question Guest has spent much of his life dealing with: just why is Africa so poor? ('Why is Africa so unproductive?'). Africa is poor, Guest asserts, mainly because of bad government. While I agree with much of his argument, I am not entirely sure that the legacy of colonial conquest and rule can be dismissed, as a shackling factor, as easily as Guest would do. Guest perhaps does not give enough weight to the entrenched political economy, nor to primary produce trade and tariff barriers, nor to the centrality of the bureaucracy that is a legacy of colonial governance mechanisms. He does too little to explore whether it is possible that the reason that Africa suffers poor standards of governance might itself be an intractable legacy of colonial rule (followed by rapid decolonization). Part of the trouble is the lack of any sense that government is the servant of the people, rather than their master. Linked to this is a persistent sense of impermanence and insecurity in governmental office, which perhaps leads to a view that the primary nature of the State is that it is a source of wealth to be captured, populated with allies, and tapped while in office. It may be that one hangover of the often arbitrary, patriarchal rule of colonial governors is that this prevails in many African countries. Afraid that they may be unable to assure citizens at some future election that they have done a good job in office, perhaps many administrations settle down to looting State resources while the sun shines.

Guest's arguments are otherwise fairly persuasive – for example, if a traumatic, occupied and brutalized past is an explanation of failure, why is South Korea twenty-fold richer than Ghana, which has roughly equivalent natural wealth and became independent and peaceful at about the same time in the late 1950s? He traces how foreign aid to Africa has become an 'addictive lullaby' that will not itself solve problems, and how study

reveals that aid levels do not correspond to real economic growth in Africa, in contrast to most other places. He returns always to the point (sometimes made a little patronizingly) that 'Africans' ultimately need to pull themselves up. In his view, efforts by rich countries to solve Africa's problems have, over the last few decades, been 'spectacularly' unsuccessful: 'countries that tend to prosper do so by their own efforts', he states, 'and outsiders can only really help at the margins.' I do not see how one can easily counter these arguments, least of all by seeking always, as some African commentators appear programmed to do, to find blame everywhere but at home.

This book comes at a time of heightened focus on Africa and African affairs, much of it led by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, who last year set up a 'Commission for Africa' to report in March 2005 on how best to 'help Africans help themselves' out of conflict, and instability, debt and poverty. These initiatives complement the vision (or description) of an 'African Renaissance,' reflected in South African President Thabo Mbeki's ambitious 'New Partnership for African Development' (NEPAD) scheme. And in many African countries, the 'third wave' of 1990's democratisation and liberalisation has seen improvement in levels of material comfort and overall affluence, and in political freedoms.

The central message of Guest's book, however, is that no miracle dawn will come to Africa, releasing the shackled continent. That is, he says, because the bonds holding her back are, if not all of African imposition, largely held firm by Africans leaders and peoples themselves. The acclaimed Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe has noted that the principle cause of African problems is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility of leadership and the challenge of personal example. Indeed, President Mbeki's NEPAD vision explicitly acknowledges this to be the primary barrier to progress. A focus of both the 2005 Commission for Africa and the US foreign policy on Africa is towards tackling corruption and the looting of national treasuries. While some external steps may help in curing vestiges of the colonial legacy, the present shackles consist mainly in a failure of Africa's own political leadership. Many of Africa's problems flow from a governmental culture of impunity, self-enrichment and non-accountability, something that Western commentators perceive as general incompetence in governance. Moreover, while there is a place for more positive (that is, accurate) coverage and writing on Africa, it is the duty of anyone accounting for the situation in many African countries to emphasise that the very real, pervasive, even lethal acts and omissions of African leaders are the primary cause of the continent's plight, and there is really no point (for the sake of political correctness, or even out of optimism) in pretending otherwise. Building on Africa's strengths – a positive approach – requires identifying weaknesses, unattended by paralyzing guilts. To my mind a most significant factor for change in Africa, and one Guest devotes some time to, is support for a vibrant independent media inside Africa itself. But related to this must be a preparedness in the foreign media to abandon any lingering colonial guilt and openly criticize those African governments deserving of this, on behalf of the vulnerable people that such regimes so routinely seem to abuse, exploit and neglect.

Of course, critical, despairing media pieces are not uncommon on some of Africa's sometimes caricature-ripe leaders and their extravagance. However, one often encounters in Western media and activist circles a focus, not on African countries themselves, but on Western governments' attitudes and activity in relation to Africa. To be sure, it is natural that pressure must be exerted where it will be felt (at home, for Western activists concerned about Africa's plight). And direct criticism can be counter-productive: Mugabe has shown glee and skill in using Western criticism of African leaders to arouse nationalist and instinctive anti-colonial reaction. But I cannot escape feeling that many in the well-meaning Geldof mould routinely miss the main target, instead bashing an array of Western actors. The main issue is often the failure of some African leaders and governments, a great predatory betrayal of their own people. These critics focus entirely on what others should be doing about Africa, to Africa, for Africa. This can reinforce the sort of subordinate perception and situation that they are trying to criticize. Calls for African debt relief in the Western media, for example, very seldom make clear that such relief must be conditional on African governments diverting monies presently servicing debt, to the basic tasks of any government (for which purpose the credit was initially extended): the provision of basic health, education and support services for its people. African people and their governments have some major obstacles to overcome, but until the focus is on the responsibility of Africans (and African leadership) for some of the state of affairs, little real progress can be made. It is insulting, too, to those local people working for change in Africa that all the keys to change lie in Western hands.

Zimbabwe is the foremost example of the Western media being distracted or embarrassed or simply playing nicely into the hands of an African leader. With the unwitting assistance of newspaper editors the world over, Robert Mugabe managed at least from 2002-2005 to portray and legitimize the problem in Zimbabwe as one of race and land, whereas it was manifestly mostly a problem of political repression against any challenge to the ruling authority: race issues abound in Zimbabwe's history, and land has always been a real political issue, but there has been a degree of unwitting media complicity in the way an issue of suppression of mass democratic aspirations came to be understood widely as an issue of correcting race-based land imbalances. Mugabe has intelligently manipulated and played media attention on his country (only his humiliation and complete out-manoeuvring of the English Cricket Board in late 2004 was a more clear success). The Western press loves nothing more than a 'White Farmer – Black Masses' story or theme. The lone white farmer, his Boer-commando beard as outdated (supposedly) as his politics, succumbing to a popular mob after a night of siege, out of ammunition, his single shot rifle useless (for example, the widely reported death of Martin Olds in 2002). Mugabe has brilliantly portrayed the problems in Zimbabwe as racial ones, the legacy of colonialism, unfair land distribution, and mass popular discontent with the white man. Even where his portrayal is received critically, it is often still on racial lines, because (I suppose) this is more interesting to global readers. While there was some good coverage of the constitutional referendum, the 2002 elections, opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai's treason trial and, lately, the March 2005 elections and their lead-up, what Mugabe has succeeded in doing is portraying the acute problems in Zimbabwe as racial and land related, rather than the brutal suppression of a mass (black) movement for democratic change. And the world's media has by and large

lapped this up, irrespective of the gross Mugabe untruth about the post-independence history of land distribution in that country. A story about racial tension is sexier than a story about the repeated shut-down of the free press in Zimbabwe.

How often does the Australian media report the use of food as a weapon in Zimbabwe, the calculated pattern of selective non-distribution of food aid to those areas perceived as against Mugabe's ZANU party? I would argue that there comes a point when intentional punitive acts (or omissions, even) calculated to achieve mass starvation of a population on the basis of their (supposed) political belief, is a crime against humanity, indictable in international criminal law. But how much foreign media attention was given to a very senior ZANU official (Didymus Mutasa, 2002) quite comfortably admitting (in the context of starvation in regions of Zimbabwe, a country of 12 million people) that Zimbabwe 'would be better off with only six million people...with people who support the struggle. We don't want all these extra people'? How often is the Australian magazine media, for example, far more interested in the plight of a white Zimbabwean farmer newly arrived in rural Australia, than in the hundreds of thousands of farm workers left behind, the unknown, unreported murders, disappearances, detentions, torture and intimidation, the young men and women forced into 're-education' (forced political indoctrination) camps to do 'national service', the routine rape of women as a political tactic, the sickening rapid accumulation of wealth in the hands of high government officials? One doesn't see it.

In his related 2002 *Economist* survey 'How to Make Africa Smile', Guest emphasises that what the continent is in most dire need of is better leadership. While debt, aspects of a colonial legacy, and some features of the global market economy act as chains on progress, Guest convincingly shows, I am myself reluctant to conclude, that Africa is shackled mainly by Africans themselves. By all means should we trumpet any African progress, and highlight the vast potential there. But we should only do so if we have frankly accounted for the primary cause of Africa's problems and pain, a manifest failure of local leadership. There may be conditions that contribute to poor leadership and governance that are alterable by some external shift in policy. But at some point, African leaders themselves must stand up and be counted, and their people supported in insisting on this.

'How to make Africa smile' Guest asked. Can one really *make* someone, a people, smile? The joy must come from within. There is much to be hopeful about in modern day Africa, when Paton's dawn will come, along with release from the bondage of those things we perceive or create. But in the meantime, and lest their plight go on unnoticed, the mass of all African people would be excused for wearing a frown more often than a smile; and often simply to cry, the beloved (the self-shackled?) continent.

*J. Ford 2004. This Review Essay was first commissioned by The Digest (Australian Review of Public Affairs) in 2004. At the time of writing the author was teaching the course 'Law and Governance in the Developing World' at SOAS, University of London.*