

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

IMMANUEL WALLERSTEIN, *Africa: The Politics of Independence and Unity*. [Single-volume reprint of *Africa: The Politics of Independence* (1961) and *Africa: The Politics of Unity* (1967)]. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005, xvi + 173 p., index + 259 p., index.

“Books should be read and assessed as a reflection of their time” (2005: 255). So begins Immanuel Wallerstein’s own reflection on his 1961 book on African independence. Surely it is not only contemporary generosity granted to works of preceding generations that requires our situating writings within the historical and political, economic and cultural contexts in which they were originally composed. Rather, to make sense of and to appreciate the nuance of argument, the hopes and the disappointments of an activist such as Immanuel Wallerstein, it is the least we owe to the texts and to our comprehension of them to read the 2005 single-volume reprint of *Africa: The Politics of Independence* (1961) and *Africa: The Politics of Unity* (1967) through the eyes of that tumultuous time of Africa’s emergence from formal colonial domination. These germinal texts were written at a time of optimism for the African continent, throwing off the shackles of colonial rule and forging a new future, based on unity – whether regional or continental – to stake Africa’s claim in the Cold War world.

In *Independence* Wallerstein positions himself as a storyteller of the unfolding narrative of Africa’s history and future. An early scholar of African politics, Wallerstein engages in a detailed empirical inquiry to advance general theoretical claims about the wave of independence that swept Africa in the early 1960s. First, Wallerstein argues (in good Marxist form) that colonial structures auto-generated social conflict that would, in some cases, lead to anti-colonial revolution; and, second, Wallerstein argues, newly independent African states were given the task of holding together new social structures.

In chapters II and III, Wallerstein discusses the expansion of European imperialism as central to the project of European modernisation and wealth, but rather than focusing on the metropolitan perspective on colonies, *Independence* examines the social changes within African societies through the process of colonisation, and how these social changes themselves sowed the seeds of anti-colonial resistance. In other words, colonisation effected a re-ordering of pre-existing governance and social order(s) in Africa; for example: enlisting in the coloniser’s army introduced servicemen to nationalism (where the nation-state is a peculiarly modern,

Western form). The introduction of formal education to “civilise” and not merely train workers and the urbanisation resulting from economic pressures on villages, the upheaval of rural economies to accommodate cash crops, the expropriation of land by white settlers, the destruction of traditional authority structures all account for some part of learning nationalism and becoming nationalist.

Whether under the direct administration that typified (with exception and variation) French colonialism, or under the indirect rule that typified (again, with exception and variation) British colonial policy, Wallerstein points to the emergent elite that simultaneously disavowed both traditional and colonial authority. This new “Westernised” elite – urbanised intellectuals, sometimes educated in the metropole – Wallerstein argues, were confronted by the (racist) incongruence between, on the one hand, European values of equal rights for individuals, rights of citizens and rights of nations and, on the other hand, the reality of their own colonial oppression. Simultaneously, African public life was increasingly characterised by various voluntary associations that emerged as proto-nationalist organisations that grew into political parties and nationalist movements.

Varying methods of governance amongst European colonial regimes produced different experiences of independence. But whether the devolution of power to emerging African governments was neat and orderly (as Wallerstein claims in chapter IV was generally the case for British colonies) or messy and abrupt (as, for example, was the case for the Belgian Congo), Wallerstein points to commonalities among newly independent states in both forging and holding together new social structures. If colonial administrations bred their own gravediggers, how best could newly independent states resist the same fate? In chapters V and VII, Wallerstein considers common strategies taken up by new African states to forge loyalty among the citizenry. Here, Wallerstein’s point is an important one for trying to make sense of the shape African governance has taken since Independence: where the nation-state is a fiction and where unity within these imposed geographic boundaries was previously ensured through the common colonial enemy, the holding together of the state as a unit and allegiance to the nation as citizens are not automatic, but concerted projects. Parties, thus, became conflated with the government, and the government with the nation-state. (Wallerstein, however, is not just overly optimistic, but simply wrong when he claims in chapter IX that single-party states are a step towards liberal democracy.) Hero figures – of which African Independence movements have no shortage – become an important rallying site. Moreover, the revival and revalorisation of pre-colonial African cultures was an important strategy to overcome the short “national” history of most African states, but also was bound up with historical and philosophical work in the negritude movement.

Chapters VI and VIII are best read in conjunction with the second book reprinted in this volume. In these chapters of *Independence* (and with more thoroughness in the first of *Unity*), Wallerstein takes up the question of

how pan-Africanism, a movement that began outside of Africa as a claim to racial equality and as a revalorisation of African heritage (think of Garveyism or the efforts of W.E.B. DuBois), became a (perhaps minor) instrument for independence movements through the forging of unities across independence struggles. However, African states need also to forge relationships with other non-African states. The difficulty, Wallerstein demonstrates, is the problem of continued relations with the previous coloniser which threatens to be(come) neo-colonial; this drove newly independent states to seek ties with countries such as the United States. What Wallerstein fails to address adequately, however, is that neo-colonial relationships can emerge between differentially powerful states even in the absence of a prior colonial relationship. Although writing at the height of the Cold War, Wallerstein gives only cursory attention to the relationship between largely neutral African states and the major Superpowers (although he gives more detailed consideration in the final chapter of *Unity*, noting the turn to the Soviet Union by African anticolonial movements, the impact of détente and the vulnerability of African states when Superpowers no longer seek their favour). Given that Africa was a proxy battleground throughout the Cold War, Wallerstein's scant discussion is truly a weakness. (Indeed, if Wallerstein could have anticipated the neglect of Africa as strategically irrelevant in the post-Cold War world and the distressing availability of Cold War small arms fuelling African conflicts, more consideration of Africa vis-à-vis the Superpowers would have been warranted.)

The purpose of the study of contemporary history, Wallerstein tells us in the introduction to *Independence*, is to understand the world "in order to act upon it" (7). Wallerstein's book is neither merely an account of colonial dominance and decline, nor merely an account of African independence and ascendance to government, but a critique of colonial discourse and ideology, articulated alongside scholars of postcoloniality and/or negritude whose own most germinal works were published in the same period (think of Memmi, Césaire, Fanon). Indeed, the first chapter of *Independence* attempts above all else to valorise Africa's denigrated cultural traditions; name long histories, empires, and regional and inter-continental trade relations; and to demonstrate the black-Africanness of art, technology and knowledges that had been – through academic racism – attributed to "whiter races" occupying African soil. Central to colonial ideology, argues Wallerstein, is the deficit of black-African accomplishments and the European colonial claim that "Africa has no history." Perhaps the greatest strength of *Independence*, therefore, is the recounting of African history, the rejection of Europe's civilising mission, and Wallerstein's hope for the future of African independent states that so animate these pages. Another strength of *Independence* is Wallerstein's flashes of prescience. Consider a brief comment (77) where Wallerstein suggests that there may be long-term consequences for the abrupt and ill-planned transition from European to African control of the Belgian Congo in light of the bloody decades of war that ravaged the DRC.

Wallerstein wrote *Africa: The Politics of Unity* as the "sequel" to *Independence*, having identified the movement towards African unity –

whether regional or pan-continental – as the most significant indigenous movement since independence (which – at the time of its original publication – had occurred less than a decade earlier). The African unity movement, according to Wallerstein, was “the most significant single African attempt to affect in an important way the rate and direction of social change” (vii). Growing out of pan-Africanism, the question of unity developed beyond a reaction to racial denigration to the specific political matter of merging African states into larger units. Throughout *Unity* Wallerstein examines the competition between pan-African unity as “movement” or as “alliance.” As he elaborates in chapter II, unity-as-movement (what Wallerstein sometimes refers to as the “core” of the pan-African movement) was revolutionary, involving the unity of African peoples in order to transform the nation-state system, Africa and the world by engaging both a race and class politics, while unity-as-alliance (or what Wallerstein refers to as the “periphery” of pan-Africanism) sought entry into the world community as equal nation-states (and races), but saw no necessary revision of the ordering of the world. The governments that fell into the alliance camp, according to Wallerstein, took a much thinner approach, while those governments that fell into the movement camp took a radical line on unity between governments, states, regions and the re-organisation of Wallerstein’s now-famous “world system” (which Wallerstein writes about in chapter XII of *Unity*).

Whereas *Independence* was very much a book about the social, the cultural and the political broadly defined, *Unity* is a book about formal politics and states as actors. As such, Wallerstein focuses on meetings of heads of states; organisations that emerge through conferences, conventions, regional blocs; and how states respond to the troubles of other African states. The Congo crises (chapters IV and VI), the Algerian war and strategies for the liberation of Southern Africa (chapter IX) are dramatic points where independent African states developed diplomatic and organisational responses collectively, although such efforts often resulted in fissures, disagreement, and diplomatic slights. Central, however, to the drive towards unity was resistance to the constant spectre of neo-colonialism. As such, unity as an ideological force – which according to Wallerstein was very powerful among Africans and a source of scepticism for non-Africans – was constituted as a prerequisite to African modernisation (chapter XI) and necessary for the autonomous development of Africa and to stave off the threat of neo-colonial interference.

While Wallerstein is right that books must be understood as reflections of their time, there is a special burden in reviewing such germinal books when they are reprinted four decades later. That special burden is not only to understand how important and comprehensive these books were when they were initially published, but to look for their value and their weaknesses in the contemporary context. These texts must be understood as forerunners to the plethora of books published in recent years on Africa; cursory searches on university library – and online bookseller – websites turn up literally dozens of books written on the geopolitics of Africa this year and last, while Wallerstein’s *Independence* and *Unity* are widely regarded as the first contemporary histories of African politics. This new vogue of

concerns about Africa and African problems (think of the excellent work of Stephen Lewis in his 2005 *Race Against Time*, The Commission for Africa's 2005 *Our Common Interest*, the "Live8" concert, G8 debt relief, or the world's too-late fascination with Rwanda or Darfur) makes the reprinting of Wallerstein's book a boon for students of African issues to situate contemporary African problems inside a long history.

Indeed these texts should be "required reading" for students of African politics – whether undergraduate (specific chapters would be excellent course readings) or graduate students, career academics or public researchers – not because Wallerstein's books are without flaws, but because Wallerstein wrote his histories as history was unfolding. While he writes in *Unity* on the struggle and the compromise to establish the OAU, we now know that the OAU has developed one of the most comprehensive bodies of human rights statutes. Throughout *Unity*, Wallerstein writes of the competition between regional and pan-continental unity; today, regional economic groupings, like ECOWAS (as a particularly successful example of economic and peacekeeping cooperation), coexist alongside both other regional groupings and the OAU. While Wallerstein writes, again in *Unity*, about debate over economic versus political unity, we witnessed in 2002 the establishment of the "African Union" (AU), which like the European Union, is to integrate African economies as a means to political unity, and which will involve justice mechanisms, human rights assurances and peacekeeping.

The greatest weakness of these books – far truer of *Unity* than *Independence* – is the weakness of any political economy divorced from a scholarship of culture, or any study of state-actors to the exclusion of regular people. Wallerstein's preoccupation with macro-history invisibilises the micro-histories, the cultural push and pull, the grassroots activism, the lived-poverty and disenfranchisement of too much of the African population. Moreover, while Wallerstein was interested in trends, patterns, general extrapolations in *Independence* and state-actors in *Unity*, taking the whole of Africa as an object of analysis means ignoring particularities, advancing generalisations, and homogenising and simplifying peoples and experiences that are too often homogenised in the global Northern imagination. While Africa's contemporary history is one tortured by hunger, curable/preventable diseases, HIV/AIDS, decades-long civil wars, poverty, corrupt governments, and inequality, Wallerstein's writing leaves no room for considering the experiences of women, children, traditional cultural practice(s), rebel movements or the emergence of international NGOs as major players in African politics and communities. While these might easily have been critiques of these texts when they were first printed in the 1960s, we now have the privilege of hindsight. Students of African politics and problems, must take advantage of that hindsight and accept the challenge that Wallerstein poses in the new introduction to this 2005 reprint – to think African politics through neoliberal globalisation; but, to do so requires a serious reckoning with the long history of scholarship on Africa.

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