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The "Politics of the Mirror":
On Geography and Afro-Pessimism

Jeff Peplke

In many respects Africa is a mirror. However distorting it may be, it reflects our own political image and has a lot to teach us about the springs of our western modernity.

—Jean-François Bayart (1993, 269)

As we enter the new millennium, the immediate outlook for the countries of Africa appears decidedly mixed. The positive side has witnessed a return to democratic elections in Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal; “consolidating” elections in Mozambique and Namibia; and sustained, if modest, economic growth in a number of countries, including Benin, Botswana, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Mozambique, Senegal, and Uganda. Consensus is emerging around an alternative model of African development, first articulated in the so-called Lagos Plan of Action in 1980, and subsequently developed into an alternative to structural adjustment programs (United Nations 1990; Oluka-Onyango 1995; Mzimkulu and Soludo 1999). The African Alternative Framework emphasizes popular participation in the development process, arguing that “adjustment must be for the benefit of the majority of the people and as such, adjustment programs must derive from within” (UN Economic Commission for Africa 1991, 12). Calls for debt relief, such as the Dakar Declaration of December 2000 assert the need for a truly African form of development (Dakar 2000, 2000). There is even recent talk of an “African Renaissance,” articulated by new African leaders such as Yoweri Museveni (2000) and Thabo Mbeki (1999, 2000).

At the same time, there are reasons to be less sanguine. We see troubled elections in Côte d’Ivoire and Tanzania; increasing civic unrest and state repression in Mugabe’s Zimbabwe and Moi’s Kenya; conflict and continued tension between Eritrea and Ethiopia; and civil wars in Angola, the Congo region, Burundi, and Sudan; and the continuing struggle of “collapsed states” such as Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia and Sierra Leone to regain some measure of stability. We can add to this crushing poverty in many parts of the continent, a staggering debt burden in most countries, recurring drought in the Horn and flooding in the south, and the devastating impacts of HIV/AIDS. Understanding the complex roots of these problems and posing potential solutions are challenges for all of us who care about the African continent and its inhabitants.
That task is made all the more challenging by a profusion of images, commentaries, and assessments attempting to describe or explain "the African crisis." A host of travel narratives, policy analyses, and popular commentaries articulate a view that Africa is a basket case, beyond help, a negative outlook known as "Afro-Pessimism" (Rieff 1998; for critiques of Afro-pessimism, see Gordon and Wolpe 1998; Borgomano 2000). One flagrant case of Afro-pessimism is Out of Africa, a soul-searching account by African-American journalist Keith Richburg, who spent three years covering conflicts in Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia, and Zaire. In the end, Richburg is happy to distance his American identity from his African roots:

excuse me if I sound cynical, jaded. I'm beaten down, and I'll admit it. And it's Africa that has made me feel this way. I feel for her suffering, I empathize with her pain, and now, from afar, I still recoil in horror whenever I see yet another television picture of another tribal slaughter, another refugee crisis. But most of all I think: Thank God my ancestor got out, because, now, I am not one of them. In short, thank God that I am an American. (Richburg 1997, xiv)

Richburg is not alone: other commentators describe the African continent using terms like "anarchy" (Kaplan 1994), "chaos" (Ayycey 1998), and "hopelessness" (The Economist 2000). What these assessments (and others like them) share is a view of the continent as a space outside the bounds of modernity and rational explanation, whereby Africa is considered unlikely to achieve any significant level of "development." One of the most troubling features of the recent Afro-Pessimism is the deployment of a startlingly simplistic notion of geography as a combination of country size and shape, resource endowment, transportation access, and climate. Africa's comparative under-development has been recently described as "a case of bad latitude" because Africans are "prisoners of geography" (Hausmann 2001) and "enslaved by ... [their] environment" (Etounga-Mangoule 2000, 69). Differences within Africa are explained by the fact that some countries have "favorable geography," while others are "challenged by geography" (Herbst 2000). Taken as a whole, this work augurs nothing less that the political acceptance of a renewed form of geographical or environmental determinism (Diamond 1997; Landes 1999; Herbst 2000; Sachs 2000; Hausmann 2001).

It is clear that geographers have an important role to play in complicating such crude formulations. Indeed, recent work in geography has contributed greatly to our understanding of a wide range of issues, including HIV/AIDS (Oppong 1998), structural adjustment (Konadu-Agyemang 2000; Owusu 2001), housing (Oldfield 2000), the informal sector (Aspas 1998), citizenship (McEwan 2000), political ecology (Basset and Zueli 2000; Awanyo 2001; Feidberg 2001), and refugees (Boscom 1998; Hyndman 2000). Taken together, such work has helped to produce a nuanced understanding of African issues, problems, and potential solutions. Still, the narratives of Afro-pessimism continue to circulate, and for this reason, I believe it is important to investigate the epistemological dimensions of this particular form of knowledge. In doing so, I want to draw upon what Patrick Chabal (1996) has called the "politics of the mirror." Chabal uses this term to describe the common tendency of Western commentators to view the African continent with assumptions that govern our beliefs about our own society. Such ethnocentric assessments frequently reflect deeply held assumptions about our own Western modernity. Chabal (1996, 46) describes the impact of doing so:

First, we have perennially been disappointed in that the reality of Africa has never matched our expectations. Second, and more ominously, we have failed to look at Africa as it is ... rather than as we imagine it to be. Third, and as a result, we have confined Africa to the dustbin of history; that is, as a continent the history of which we cannot be expected to understand and on which we eventually "give up."

In what follows, I want to reflect on the implications of viewing Africa with an ethnographic mirror, and to suggest what this might mean for geographers. In the first section of this essay I trace the ways in which an imperialist understanding of space was mobilized during colonialism, one that continues to influence much of our contemporary understandings of Africa and Africans. Next, I consider how recent scholarship has challenged the politics of the mirror by bringing new interpretive lenses to bear on the ways in which Africa "works" via three arenas of scholarship, in particular - politics, economic change, and cultural identity. The lesson derived from this work, I argue, is that we should strive to bring the realities of the African continent back into the ways in which geographers understand space, place, and environments. In conclusion, I reflect upon the ways in which the mirror can be inverted, and thus serve to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about modernity as well as to move toward more ethical and just ways of conceptualizing the relationship between identity and space.

Colonial History and the Space of Modernity
The penchant for gaz ing at Africa through the lenses of our own political culture has a long history. It stretches back at least as far as the ancient Greeks, for whom the civil space of the polis was distinguished from those areas (in-
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clinging Africa) populated by “foreigners” (barbaroi) or “savages” (agrioi) (Mudimbe 1994). The contemporary manifestations of the African mirror, however, have their roots in the European Enlightenment and its response to human diversity. Perhaps the most important intellectual figure in this project was Immanuel Kant, whose philosophy separated geographical diversity from divine teleology (Livingstone 1992). For Kant, geography was the empirical description of the earth and its inhabitants: “each foreign experience,” wrote Kant, “communicates itself to us either as a story or as a description. The first is a history, the other a geography” (quoted in May 1970, 236). Kant delivered a popular course on the subject of geography for forty years, lectures that had a significant influence on, among others, Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Ritter (Hartshorne 1939).

While he presented a collection of facts about the physical landscape, his descriptions of its people include prejudicial and stereotypical images of Europe’s “others.” Hottentots are described as “dirty”; the Javanese are “thieving,” and “conning”; the Iapps and Greenlanders are “timid” and “lazy”; mountain dwellers are “persevering” and “brave”; and so on (quoted in Harvey 2000, 533; May 1970, 66). Kant contends, “humanity achieves its greatest perfection with the white race. The yellow Indians have somewhat less talent. The Negroes are much inferior and some of the peoples of the Americas are well below them” (quoted in Harvey 2000, 533). Such views were common at the time, but they are particularly striking in Kant’s own voice given his cosmopolitan and universal ethics. Kant’s thought thus presents us with a paradox: on the one hand, he articulated an ethics founded in an inherent “cosmopolitical right” based upon “conditions of universal hospitality” (Kant 1939, 23); on the other, he presented a world of racial hierarchy.

The discourse of social Darwinism sought to reconcile these contradictions; cultural differences were viewed, not as absolute, but as temporary stages in a developmentalist narrative. European modernity was held up as an ideal, as the evolutionary goal or endpoint toward which all other cultures should strive. Within this narrative, universal rights and ethics were theoretically possible, but in practice they would have to wait until the less “culturally developed” peoples progressed much further along the evolutionary scale. Such theories, as V. I. Mudimbe (1994, 29) points out, “became the mirror reflecting ‘primitive’ societies, focusing on their particular positions on the linear chain of civilizations, and, later on, as a service to colonial enterprises, analyzing the conditions for converting these societies.”

Mudimbe’s mention of “colonial enterprises” should serve to remind us of our own complicity in constructing mirror, for it was the discipline of geogra-
to those on the receiving end of colonization. As Franz Fanon described it, "the colonial world is a world cut in two ... inhabited by two different species ... When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species" (1963, 38, 40).

This " parceling out" of the world was not only a discursive maneuver of the colonial project, but was actively produced through the structuring of colonial space. A whole range of material practices transformed the chaotic and pre-modern spaces of the colonies into structured and orderly territories: "reserves" were marked out for indigenous occupation; towns were surveyed and built; land was fenced and enclosed; transportation networks were laid out and built; administrative districts delineated. Such "spatial discourses" operated as a means to make the space of the colony legible to the European gaze, and hence subject to appropriation and control, as recent work has shown in places such as Egypt (Mitchell 1988), German Southwest Africa (Noyes 1992), South Africa (Robinson 1996; Popkewitz 2001), Zanzibar (Myers 1998), and Tanganyika (Kopf 2000). In the process, geographical difference was domesticated, such that African space could be remade, or territorialized, in the image of Europe (Young 1995; Mbembe 2000). Those aspects of African subjects and societies that did not fit this rational, Cartesian model (e.g., polygamy, nomadism, witchcraft, communal land holdings) required erasure, if even in a violent form. Through such erasure and exclusion the European subject of culture and history could be affirmed as universal (Mitchell 2000).

As Stuart Hall has put it, "the very notion of an autonomous, self-produced and self-identical cultural identity, like that of a self-sufficient economy or absolutely sovereign polity, had in fact to be discursively constructed in and through 'the Other'; through a system of similarities and differences" (emphasis added) (1996, 232). Going at least as far back as the mid-nineteenth century, the spaces of "darkest Africa" served as the unacknowledged "constitutive outside" against which the positive image of European culture and society could be maintained (Driver 2001). Africa, as the "other" against which the light of modern civilization could be projected, has been fundamental to the ways in which we have crafted and understood our modernity. It is in that sense that Charles Plot (1999, 21) reminds us, "Modernity's roots lie as much in Africa as Europe."

Here, then, we might return to the contradiction of Kant's geography. It is not only the case that his "descriptions" of geographical difference were in conflict with his universal ethics. Rather, we might suggest that his ethics to some extent depended upon his geography, in the same manner in which the colonial project in Africa depended upon the subordination or elimination of Africa's material geographies and spatial practices. Africa thus became a kind of "geographical unconscious" vis-à-vis the hegemony of a Eurocentric outlook. That Africa remains a backdrop for European modernity is reflected in the work of contemporary Afro-pessimists. But contemporary debates about African politics, economic development, and cultural identity challenge those who wield the African mirror as a way to legitimate a particular, European form of modernity.

Rethinking Politics

Perhaps no topic receives more attention from the Afro-pessimists than the failure of African politics. The history of one party rule, military coups, and despotic leaders like Obote and Mobutu are cited as proof that Africa is not ready for modern democracy. Keith Richburg's suggestion that "corruption is the cancer eating at the heart of the African state ..." leads him to conclude that "this problem of corruption, from the president all the way down to the customs officials at the border posts, that seems to me about as good an explanation as any for Africa's plight" (Richburg 1997, 173, 175). George Ayittey (1998, 150-1) is even more blunt, describing what he christens the "vampire state":

Dishonesty, thievery, and speculation pervade the public sector. Public servants embezzle state funds; high-ranking ministers are on the take. The chief bandit is the head of state himself ... The African state has been reduced to a mafia-like bazaar, where anyone with an official designation can pilage at will. In effect, it is a "state" that has been hijacked by gangsters, crooks, and scoundrels...

These characterizations, and others like them, reflect a Western model of the political sphere - election procedures, representative institutions, and bureaucratic apparatuses. In the African context, however, there is little practical distinction between "formal politics" and the realm of civil society. The political exists in a much more informal and personalized form.

Actors and "political" activities cannot be as easily separated from other realms of society. Instead, they infuse society through a vast array of channels, networks and associations. Such networks cut across dimensions of African identity and may include, for example, affiliations based upon kinship, clan, ethnicity, locality, religion, or age cohort.

The notion of le politique par le bas, or "politics from below" has important implications for how we understand the nature of politics in the African context (Chabal and Daloz 1999, 29). Political relationships are not rooted in Western
conceptions of formal representation, in which individuals act to institutionalize rules and decisions for the benefit of some constituency or of society as a whole. Instead, politics in Africa are generally filtered through a complex set of patron-client relationships. Chabal and Daloz (1999, 15) underscore the importance of patronal affiliation: “the legitimacy of the African political elites, such as it is, derives from their ability to nourish their clientele on which their power rests. It is therefore imperative for them to exploit governmental resources for patronal purposes.” Legitimacy in this context is based upon notions of reciprocity and redistribution, which regulate the ability to meet the expectations of one’s clients. In some cases, it is also based upon ostentatious displays of wealth, which can serve to assuage political clientele that existing political networks and affiliations will bear fruit. Given the porous nature of the boundary between the institutional sphere of “high politics” and the everyday forms of patronage characterizing “low politics,” it is quite reasonable for both resources and power to flow between them. For those able to gain access to administrative resources, the state offers a vast array of opportunities to political entrepreneurs for the accumulation of economic and political capital, if properly channeled through socially sanctioned networks of patronage and redistribution.

This notion of politics also has important implications for how we interpret the widespread charge of corruption and mismanagement leveled against many African governments. Bayart (1993, 235) argues that:

“corruption” as well as conflicts inaccurately described as “ethnic” … [are] no more than the simple manifestation of the “politics of the belly.” In other words, the social struggles which make up the quest for hegemony and the production of the State bear the hallmarks of the rush for spoils in which all actors – rich and poor – participate in the world of networks.

Widespread social practices referred to in the West as fraud or embezzlement are publicly accepted in Africa, providing they do not reach the level of a Mobutu-style kleptocracy. In this way, the lack of formalized checks and balances can be viewed as part of a range of social practices, through which the redistribution of the political and economic resources of modern state activities are negotiated. Moreover, these are not “antiquated practices on their way to extinction but, much more realistically … codes of conduct which are at the heart of modern economic activities” (Chabal and Daloz 1999, 101).

The Afro-pessimists, of course, would not agree. For Ayittey (1998, 343) “the state vehicle that currently exists in many African countries cannot take Africans on the ‘development journey’ into the twenty-first century.” To assert this, however, is to assume that African politics are somehow a “corrupted” form of the Western norm, and thus, to rely yet again upon the politics of the mirror. As Chabal (1996, 46) notes, “the West demands a democracy in which it can recognize itself: party plurality, party competition, regular multiparty elections and parliamentary politics.” In Africa, however, this form of political modernity was never successfully imposed, and the African state bears little resemblance to the formal, institutionalized apparatus of traditional political theory. The colonial state, and the post-colonial state that followed, were always hybrids of modern bureaucratic rationality and African forms of political expression. The space of the state thus remains in constant flux, constituted by multiple political repertoires, which combine the formal political culture of modernity with African custom and practice (Bayart 1993). Instead of measuring African politics against our own expectations, we should examine the ways in which the realm of “politics” has been vested with meaning, based upon a creative and innovative articulation of local African realities with the Western model of the state. In this way, an appreciation of African politics can serve to alter the ways in which we understand the political geography of contemporary states.

**Querying Globalization and Development**

A second manifestation of the African mirror can be seen in common understandings of economic development. Africa is generally depicted as a space outside of global interaction, an area “left behind” by the rapid economic and financial integration of the globe. William Cofley, for example, describes the seventh and “bottom” category in a “newer” international division of labor as follows: “approximately fifty ‘least developed countries,’ almost all of which are in Africa, maintain very few economic connections with the rest of the world, except for exporting small quantities of natural resources. For all intents and purposes, they are external to the world economic system” (Cofley 1996, 60). In a similar vein, Ricardo Hausmann (2001, 53) writes “it is the absence of globalization – or an insufficient dose of it – that is truly to blame for … [the world’s] inequalities. The solution for geography’s poverty trap is for developing countries to become more globalized.” As Grant and Agnew (1996) caution, however, this thesis that Africa is “falling out” of the world economy is an oversimplification. In reality, African states are engaging to an increasing degree in the world economy, and the trajectories of their political economy can be seen as an explicit response to the increasing globalization of economic activity (Chabal and Daloz 1999; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000).

The problem with many economic explanations, like those of politics, is that they rely upon a Western understanding of the space economy as com-
prised of formal networks of finance and trade, which can be accurately e-
numerated and compared across different economies. If, however, the divi-
sion between “high” and “low” politics is untenable, so too is the distinction be-
tween the formal and informal sectors of the economy. Measured in terms of
GNP, imports and exports, and debt levels, there is little doubt that overall,
African formal economies are lagging behind most parts of the world. This
does not indicate, however, that Africans are not engaged in the global economy.
As the need to find new sources of accumulation to sustain Africa’s diverse
networks of client-patron relationships has become ever more pressing in the
context of Africa’s deepening economic crisis, African elites have become adept
at creating new forms of rent out of new forms of modernization.

Flows of aid are one case in point, suggesting some of the ways that African
governments skilfully exploit the resources of dependence (Chabal and Daloz 1999). African leaders, that is, have learned how to play the interna-
tional aid game, to speak the language of NGOs, the World Bank, and the
IMF: “the fact that some Africans are now prepared to support structural ad-
justment is not in itself an indication of its desirability. It is, rather, the proof
that those Africans are adept at learning the language which will deliver the
most financial aid from the West” (Chabal 1996, 47).

In this context, financial liberalization offers new opportunities to accumu-
late power and prestige within networks of client-patron relationships. Many of
these activities lie outside of the juridical apparatus of the state. They include,
for example, price fixing, banking fraud, money laundering, customs evasion,
Nigerian “419 frauds,” Ponzi schemes, the personal manipulation of privatization
schemes, and so on. While Afro-pessimists decry such activities as “corrupt,”
they cannot be considered in isolation as simply illegal or criminal, but are bet-
ter seen as “among a larger variety of techniques designed to exploit opportuni-
ties offered by the state and to gain access to the profits generated by operating
between local and international sectors” (Bayart et al. 1998, 81). Included in
these “international sectors” are the greatly expanded illicit, yet international
flows of commodities such as diamonds, arms, drugs, and timber.

Dense African networks of illicit commodity trade, drawing on personal
and ethnic ties, extend from Dakar to Paris, from Lagos to London and be-
yond. This “second economy,” operating outside of formal state regulation,
offers myriad opportunities, especially in regions where state authority has
collapsed (MacGaffey 1991; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000). Here
again, we can see the politics of the mirror at work. As Filip De Boek (1998,
779) suggests, such trade is generally interpreted as an illogical or criminal
distortion of more “normal” capitalist processes, and thus “reflects the dic-
tates of first-world imperatives and moralities.” Instead, he argues, such ac-

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tivities are concerted attempts to take advantage of Africa’s insertion into the
global economy, to manage at a personal level the contradictions of neoliberal
modernity. In this respect, it is no surprise that criminal networks have flour-
ished in Africa at the same time that globalization has erased the importance
of the nation-state in regulating economic affairs.

This is the case even in the most violent and anarchic “warlord states.”
Such places appear to be the paradigm cases of Kaplan’s (1994) “coming anar-
chy,” a morass of “tribal conflict” and primitive savage violence, representations
of what Richards (1996) has referred to such the “New Barbarism” thesis. In
reality, however, conflicts like those in Sierra Leone or Liberia are fueled by their
insertion in global flows of commodities, weapons and money, flows which
often rely upon violence for their continued functioning (Richards 1996; Ellis
1999). While such violence can in no sense be condoned, they are the prevailing
strategies for creating new opportunities for accumulation, opportunities that
have come about as a direct result of the ongoing reorganization of global capital
(Reno 1998). As Richards (1996, xvii) points out, “the Sierra Leone conflict is
... more, culturally, in the hybrid Atlantic world of international commerce.”

All of this suggests the need to re-examine the ways in which we conceptual-
ize the geographies of spaces and flows of the global economy. African econo-

cies work, often through what Chabal and Daloz (1999) call the

“instrumentalization of disorder.” In a world where globalization has erased the
role of the state, the “criminalization” of the African state and the rise of interna-
tional networks engaged in illicit smuggling is, in this sense, a fundamentally
modern phenomenon, emerging as a result of international economic integra-
tion, rather than signaling an evasion from it (Bayart et al. 1999). The entrepre-
neural traders manage this integration by self-consciously straddling traditional
boundaries of sovereignty and juridical control, and in so doing, creatively “seek
to provide their own order and predictability in the midst of disorder” (MacGaffey
and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000, 189). In an analysis of the diamond trade in Zaire,
for example, De Boek argues, “the diamonds and dollars allow people to negotiate,
discursively or otherwise, between different realities and identities” (De Boek
1998, 780). This, then, brings us to a third manifestation of the mirror, in this
case governing our understandings of African culture and identity.

Challenging the Modern Subject

Africans, as we know, are frequently portrayed as hapless and passive victims
of their cruel fate, helpless in the face of poverty, AIDS, corrupt and despotic
rulers, and natural disasters. Richburg (1997, 232), for example, writes of the
"maddening propensity of Africans to wallow in their own suffering, to simply roll over when kicked." Such cultural characterizations then serve as ready-made explanations for Africa's lack of development. In attempting to explain the different trajectories of South Korea and Ghana, for example, Samuel Huntington (2000, xiii) avers "South Koreans valued thrift, investment, hard work, education, organization, and discipline. Ghanaians had different values. In short, cultures count." A more startling example comes from Daniel Etounga-Manguelle (2000, 69-75), who writes as follows:

In African society, which exalts the glorious past of ancestors through tales and fables, nothing is done to prepare for the future ... Take an African, give him a bit of power, and he will likely become bumptious, arrogant, intolerant, and jealous of his prerogatives ... The concept of individual responsibility does not exist [in Africa] ... [The African] demonstrates a propensity to feast that suggests that African societies are structured around pleasure [and not work] ... [African is] a society in which magic and witchcraft flourish today ... a sick society ruled by tension, fear and moral disorder ... Totalitarianism ... is inscribed in the foundations of our tribal culture.

In the end, asserts Etounga-Manguelle (2000, 77), Africans require nothing less than a "cultural adjustment program": "we must go to the heart of our morals and customs in order to eradicate the layer of mud that prevents our societies from moving into modernism."

There is of course nothing new about such views - Africa's "failure" is due to its backward and uncivilized culture. From this perspective, Africa's prospects for development hinge on the ability of its people to take up the values of Western modernity: efficiency, interpersonal trust, entrepreneurialism, and respect for "freedom," authority, and the rule of law. Once again, Africa becomes the mirror of the West.

Misinterpretations of African culture, I think, stem from the fact that African forms of identity do not comfortably fit with the Western understanding of the rational, autonomous political subject. As Charles Piot (1999, 16) suggests:

a series of Euroamerican conceptions of self and society lie at the heart of ... [our] theories. The person/individual (or the group as individual -write-large) is variously conceived as autonomous, property, self-interested, accumulative, and having independent agency - measured in terms of its power or control over others.

A closer examination of African cultural attitudes and practices, however, offers a different interpretation. Rather than being "primitive" and "premodern," we might suggest that African forms of identity and culture can be seen as emblematic of the postmodern. As I have suggested, Africans do not relegate politics to a circumscribed set of institutions and practices, but rather are inserted into complex webs and networks of personalized and informal relations. In this sense, African identities are more communal than individualist. As Chabal and Daloz put it, individuals "are not perceived as being meaningfully and instrumentally separate from the (various) communities to which they belong" (1999, 32). Yet individuals, while embedded in multiple networks of affiliation and belonging, "can and do ceaselessly strive to improve themselves, including in the political arena" (Bayart et al. 1999, 34).

The successful management of such relationships requires keeping one's options open; deliberately straddling the boundaries between the traditional and the "modern," and frequently the boundaries between different states (Hyndman, 2000). This requires developing a "register of improvisations," and remaining ever vigilant for the opportunity to accumulate wealth, power, or favors (Mbembe and Roitman 1995). In this way, the African self can be seen as relational, a "diffuse, fluid self - a self that is mutable and permeable, and infused with the presence of others, both human and nonhuman" (Piot 1999, 19). Hecht and Simone (1994) refer to such practices as "the art of African micropolitics," the ways in which people struggle for a "space of operation." Africans, they suggest, have the ability to cultivate a "borderline personality ... a decontextualized self, obligated to incessantly change itself" (Hecht and Simone 1994, 90). Such strategies take on a particular importance amid Africa's long economic crisis, characterized by decay and abandonment, failing technology, and "the end of the salary" (Mbembe and Roitman 1995). In this context Africans improve with free-lance activities like hawking and recycling, and thereby, exemplify Africans' enormous capacity for making do:

Acting efficaciously requires that one carefully cultivate an extraordinary capacity to be simultaneously inside and outside, for and against, and to constantly introduce changes in the reading and usage of things, playing, in this way, with the structures and apparatuses, capturing them where possible and eluding them where necessary. (Mbembe and Roitman 1995, 340)

These forms of illusion and elusion are also used in expressions of dissent. Despite the assertions of Afro-pessimism, Africans are not simply passive victims of the capricious whims of despotic leaders. Instead, the African political sub-
ject practices more subtle forms of resistance, often laden with encrypted social meanings (Bayart 1993; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000). Monga (1996, 7) calls on us to pay attention to the ways in which Africans use anger to capitalize on conditions of disorder, by transforming social laws and conventions—through play, the deformation of rules, and cultural forms of irreverence—into “something quite different from what their leader had in mind.”

To take a common example, within African urban areas, “official” circuits of information and power are interpreted and circulated through extensive networks of informal rumor, innuendo, and “street buzz.” This tireless murmuring of social practice, known as radio-tronci, or “pavement radio,” serves as the primary means by which many urban dwellers acquire information (Bayart 1993; Ellis 1993). Triulzi (1996, 85) suggests that this form of counter-information is a modern form of oral tradition, its “street version”: “[Radio-tronci] propagates the judgments of the community it serves on the events it considers important. And so these pavement rumors, as they are spread, assume new meanings, reflecting the expectations, fears and protests of the man in the street.” As Stephen Ellis (1993, 474) has described in the case of Togo, radio-tronci expresses the basic political vocabulary of society, and thereby serves as “a crucial element in the interplay of forces between state and civil society.”

In Senegal, a different form of protest emerged in the 1990s, this time a visual display. Sei Setal – “clean, keep clean” in Wolof – became the movement motto among the youth and the unemployed, which sought to transform the spaces of Dakar through cleaning, building and, especially, the painting of murals and graffiti. The iconography of the murals expresses a dissatisfaction with the ordering of the city, and draws on a diverse array of characters, both local and global: images from local oral tradition and the Quran mingle with paintings of Donald Duck, Sigmund Freud, Batman, and Santa Claus (Hecht and Simon 1994; Triulzi 1996). In the process, neighborhoods of Dakar are creating a local vernacular, a mixed collection of meanings that serves as an implicit critique of the official narration of the Senegalese nation.

Perhaps the most elaborate form of such vernacular self-expression is la Sape, a movement that has become popular in both Congo-Brazzaville and Congo-Kinshasa. Sapeur is French for dressing elegantly, and, beginning in the late 1960s, urban youth known as sapeurs began to stage elaborate competitions, in which individuals donned French designer clothing in mock admiration of local elites. The practice has since evolved to include changes in physical appearance known as “the look,” which includes straightening of the hair, lightening of the skin and enlargement of the stomach and buttocks using a special diet. The rituals of la Sape constitute an elaborate parody of power and privilege, while at the same time, creating local opportunities for gaining prestige and influence as a successful sapeur. All of these practices, and myriad more, serve as “hidden transcripts” expressing a subtle but nevertheless legible opposition to the dominant social and political culture.

This same reasoning can be used to understand the continued existence of practices related to witchcraft, the occult, and to religion more generally (Monga 1996; Werbner 1998). If African identities straddle social boundaries, they also must travel between the times and spaces of the ancestors, the present-day, and the yet-to-be. Cultural practices draw upon a wide range of myths, folktales and beliefs to manage this process. Witchcraft, in this sense, should not be seen as some primitive remainder, but rather an active response to social and cultural change. It is, in some sense, a narrativization of ambiguity, tied to dislocation, new opportunities, and the rapid transformation of social roles and mores, especially in the face of new forms of capital accumulation (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Indeed, Peter Geschiere (1997) has shown how, in Congo, forms of witchcraft are often spontaneous inventions, used, on the one hand to foster the accumulation of wealth or, on the other, to challenge the legitimacy of those who have managed to tap into new found sources of wealth. Accusations of witchcraft are often made against wealthy individuals who refuse to redistribute their gains through the normal social channels. In this sense, “witchcraft can be said to contribute to the maintenance of the cohesion of society, in so far as it helps resolve problems that might otherwise result in even higher social discontent and strife” (Chabal and Daloz 1999, 74).

Occult practices are also, contrary to common perception, deeply embedded in processes of globalization. In Sierra Leone, for example, the spirit world includes a “Place of Witches,” which has been described as follows:

[It is] a prosperous city where skyscrapers adjoin houses of gold and diamonds; where Mercedes-Benzes are driven down fine roads … where electronics vendors sell … VCRs and computers … and where witch airports dispatch witch planes … so fast that they can fly to London and back within an hour. (Shaw 1997, 857)

Similarly, in Niger, there is a belief in the road spirit who causes head-on collisions, who reportedly takes the shape of a beautiful women whose lower body is a rubber tire upon which the word “Dunlop” is inscribed (Watts 1991). These beliefs are not retreats back into primordial identity in the face of time-space compression (Harvey 1989), but rather innovative strategies for managing the flux of change. Witchcraft and the occult, as Fisht and Geschiere (1996, 194)
assert, are fundamentally modern phenomena, and should be seen as responses to processes of capitalist globalization and modernity: "occult conceptions are invoked, more and more openly, to interpret new inequalities, new forms of power and their drastic consequences for local relations."

An understanding of these processes, too, should challenge the ways in which we conceptualize the "local relations" about which Geschiere speaks, for witchcraft also "connects ... towns and villages to a limitless urban world of wealth and rapid global modernity" (Shaw 1997, 857). This counters the view that urban areas are the spark of modern change, while rural areas are beset by primitive tradition, in favor of a more relational understanding in which the hinterland is as important as the center (De Boek 1996). Even the most seemingly remote areas of Africa are embedded in forms of cultural exchange. Charles Piot provides a fine example of this in his examination of the Kabre of northern Togo:

Everything - their prestational economy, their ritual system, their kinship system - is arguably the product of interactions between Kabre and various others (particularly Europeans) over the last 300 years. Recognizing such entanglement should also force us to acknowledge the two-way nature of processes of transculturation. (Piot 1999, 21)

Just as with politics and economic transactions, African forms of identity have evolved to take advantage of a world in which the formal boundaries between states, and between rural and urban, have lost their meaning. This requires coming to grips with the constant interpenetration of different spheres of existence (Hecht and Simone 1994; Chabal and Daloz 1990). In so doing, we are forced to challenge the ways in which we conceptualize contemporary cultures of in Africa. As Chabal and Daloz put it (1999, 132), "it is ... possible to interpret the primacy of the informal as deriving from a different logic and resulting in a distinct type of modernity which goes against the grain of existing interpretations." Indeed, rather than the uncivilized, premodern savage of Kant's geography, or even the modern political subject of his cosmopolitan ethics, we might instead view the African subject, existing in multiple times and spaces, cultivating a fluid sense of identity, as the post-modern subject par excellence.

**Conclusion: Geography the African Unconscious**

In 1890, Halford Mackinder gave a speech to the Manchester Geographical Society, in which he described the importance of "general geography" as a form of training for commercial enterprise. "This is geographical capacity," he suggested, "the mind which fits easily over the globe, which thinks in terms of the map, which quickly clothes the map in meaning, which correctly and intuitively places the commercial, historical, or political drama on its stage" (quoted in O'Faolain 1996, 87). Here, at the height of imperialism, six years after the Berlin Conference, we can see a paradigmatic description of the spatial epistemology of modernity. The geographer is the trained and rational subject, casting his (almost certainly male) gaze over an objective world stage, filled with facts and events to be interpreted according to his knowledge and expertise. But we can see here too the hidden politics of the mirror, for Mackinder acknowledges that, although the world's "drama" might be part of an objective reality, in our understandings, descriptions, and interpretations of it, we impose meaning. Geography, far from being the simple "description" of empirical facts (as Kant would have it), is a form of knowledge, and hence power, and in this way our descriptions matter, perhaps nowhere more so than in Africa.

For Mackinder - and no less for recent Afropessimists like Robert Kaplan, Samuel Huntington, and George Ayittey - Africa is "clothed" in a set of meanings derived from outside of the continent. Rather than try to allow Africa to speak to us, it has been constructed through the familiar telological discourses of our specifically Western modernity. In the words of Chabal and Daloz (1999, 141), "our approach to the continent has been driven by a need to fit its supposed complexities - its enigmatic psychology, as it were - into an explanatory scheme congruent with our view of Western development." This is not simply a matter of geographical location, for African scholars and political leaders are not immune to wielding this very same mirror. As Kari has recently argued (2000, 2), "many Africans ... spend the greater part of their time looking at themselves in the mirror of the very people who imposed their condition on us in practically all areas of life...." The same point was of course made by an earlier generation of African leaders and intellectuals - people like Franz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Amilcar Cabral, and Léopold Senghor. As Senghor (1965, 62, 97) put it, "we must be sure in our own minds that Africa is not just a series of geographical facts ... Africa's misfortune has been that our secret enemies, in defending their values, have made us despise our own. And so we now go around shouting slogans from their ideologies which we are now native enough to believe in."

I have tried in this essay to provide an introduction to some of those who are drawing upon novel theoretical and interpretive frameworks to make sense of Africa's contemporary landscapes outside of the politics of the mirror. Such work highlights the fact that "the political, social, and economic "logics" of
contemporary Africa come together in a process of modernization which does not fit with the Western experience of development” (Chabal and Daloz 1999, 143). There are, I think, two related implications for geography. First, we need to bring our collective talents to bear on challenging the simplistic geographies of the politics of the mirror. As geographers, we have an important role to play in examining the complex interrelationships between globalization, political and economic change, cultural expression, and social space. In the process, we need to form a nuanced and grounded understanding of Africa’s distinct political and cultural epistemology as a certain type of modernity.

Given the currency of contemporary forms of Afro-pessimism, it is easy to overlook the fact that societies in Africa “…are continually developing new strategies of an extraordinary diversity and inventiveness, which offers proof that Africa, so often said to be governed by age-old tradition, is in fact a place of unrivaled change and mobility” (Bayart et al. 1999, 2). Africa is productive of postcolonial, even postmodern, spaces, integrated into circuits of globalization, and in this way the continent plays an active role in the construction of the various forms of early twenty-first-century modernity. What this means, and this is the second implication of what I have been arguing here, is that Africa, as mirror, reflects our understandings of ourselves, and thus has helped to shape the contours of our own Western modernity.

In the introduction to his edited volume on African philosophy, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (1997, 13) writes: “Is it not important to ask whether or not the very condition or possibility of European modernity as an idea was the explicit metaphysical negation and theoretical exclusion of Africa and the African, archetypically frozen as ‘savage’ and ‘primitive’? Given what I have tried to argue here, we can quite readily answer in the affirmative. I would suggest, however, that perhaps the way to characterize the cultural “work” that was required of Africa is not “negation” or “exclusion,” but rather repression. For Africa was always there, serving as an unconscious reminder of the failure of European modernity's claims to universality. As Timothy Mitchell (2000, xiv) put it, “each staging of the modern must be arranged to produce the global history of modernity, yet each requires those forms of difference that introduce the possibility of a discrepancy, that return to undermine its unity and identity.” To weaken the power of the African mirror requires deconstructing the discourses governing our interpretations of the continent and examining the ways in which an African epistemology still haunts our spatial imaginations as a kind of “geographical unconscious” (Mudimbe 1988, 1994; Appiah 1992).

New research on Africa has begun to do just this. Emanating from a vari-

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The "Politics of the Mirror": On Geography and Afro-Pessimism


