

The African Impasse: An Exchange with Steve Horvath

Following the online meeting of the Dartmouth Club of Sarasota-Manatee on November 20, 2020, Steve Horvath, a former roommate at the College, sent remarks concerning Africa. This edited excerpt of our exchange is a fitting conclusion to the first Narratives exercise.

Horvath: I wanted to follow up your 'visit' to the Dartmouth Club of Sarasota with a question. It concerns the *status quo* in governance in Africa. Most of my knowledge comes from reading *The Economist*. Those weekly reports are some of the saddest stories I have encountered, not least because they seem repetitive. Almost every piece of good news about Africa is usually offset by bad ones. I can only imagine how this must affect someone like yourself who has invested so much of his life trying to help improve those conditions.

Joseph: Your reading habits put you in the top .01% of the American population in knowledge of contemporary Africa.



Steve Horvath, Dartmouth '65

Horvath: In reading the essay you sent to accompany your talk in Sarasota, I particularly noticed a paragraph at the end. I'll copy it here as it encapsulates the problem.

"Obama's "Fight of Our Time" is for the fundamental means to a humane life – water, electricity, education, health, transport, a sanitary environment and gainful employment. These objectives cannot be accomplished if a substantial portion of national wealth is systematically drained into private consumption. In country after country in Africa, constitutional arrangements to limit abuses of power, such as term limits for executive positions, are being eroded. The consequence is the entrenching of governmental systems that enjoy less legitimacy and are less efficacious. The post-colonial project in the continent has frayed in several key countries. It should be rethought."

The only country in the continent that seems to have benefitted from good governance is Botswana. I believe the benefits of natural resources (in its case, diamonds) have been passed on to the population as a whole, rather than an elite segment of kleptocrats. But it is very much the exception.

Joseph: Yes, Botswana is an exception, but no longer as exceptional in certain areas. Its governance model is not applicable to much of Africa for a variety of reasons. Here's the link to an exchange about Botswana involving colleagues who have studied it closely: <https://doi.org/10.21985/N2JR1F>.

Your reference to "the post-colonial project" prompted me to think about what is happening now. I am referring to the incursion of China into many African countries. It may not be as obviously invasive as that perpetrated by 19th-century European powers, but resource extraction, infrastructure funding, foreign direct investment and sovereign debt load do not, in my view, bode well for fragile societies and weak governments.

Joseph: This is an important topic. There are major studies available.¹

Horvath: Is it fair to say that the entire region suffers from historical conditions whereby current political structures (and countries) were created by outsiders (colonialists) rather than through natural development? Once the outsiders withdrew, these structures were (and are) under extreme stress due to ethnic loyalties and conflicts? There are certainly strong parallels with the experience of the Middle East in this regard although, in the latter case, tribal dynasties created a form of stability that exceeds anything in Africa.

Joseph: Understood. But it is not the "form of stability" I would recommend for Africa.²

Horvath: Assuming you do not disagree, what effect does the present situation in Africa have on you, as someone who has devoted much of a passionately engaged life to promoting improved outcomes? In your view, why haven't things turned out better, given the numerous international efforts?

Joseph: The effect is to make me double-down in my work. I am much involved in the continent as a "public intellectual", as well as being a longtime scholar, teacher, policy analyst and advocate. I don't disengage when things go badly. And I do not lose perspective when there are (usually temporary) upswings. It is my life's work, as you observe. No different, perhaps than other professions such as medicine and public health.³

There are many resources I can bring to these challenges. I possess an extensive archive from my engagement in Africa (print and photographic), a substantial personal library, and a network of superb colleagues.⁴

¹ See Howard W. French, *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants are Building a New Empire in Africa* (New York: Random House, 2014). For ongoing information and analyses, see www.sais-cari.org where the pioneering work of Professor Deborah Brautigam has been carried forward.

² These issues have been much debated by scholars of African history and politics. Of particular note are the following: Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton University Press, 2000); Richard Joseph and Jeffrey Herbst, "Responding to State Failure in Africa", *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 2 (1997); Crawford Young, *The Postcolonial State in Africa: Fifty Years of Independence, 1960-2010* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2012); and Mark R. Beissinger and Crawford Young, ed., *Beyond State Crisis? Postcolonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press and the Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

³ Of relevance is that I spent my first two years at Dartmouth as a pre-med student. Indeed, it was a desire to become a medical doctor that first brought the College to my attention. Understanding and responding to the health (or ill-health) of the "body politic" forms a continuum with my early collegiate studies. The most significant policy/research project in which I have been involved is the *Research Alliance to Combat HIV/AIDS (REACH)*, 2005-2011. This institutional alliance was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and centered on Nigeria.

⁴ Thanks to Arch Library, Northwestern University's Open Access repository, a sizeable number of documents have been digitized and made accessible. <https://arch.library.northwestern.edu/> They include a complete collection of *Africa Demos*, a bulletin of the Carter Center (1989-1995), and *AfricaPlus*, a blog produced at Northwestern. Other

Horvath: I tend to think the critical ingredients have been, are, and will be the strength and quality of institutions, the rule of law and checks and balances on power, along with improved education. Perhaps that's just an American's perspective. Not every country or region will be blessed with a George Washington, a James Madison, or an Alexander Hamilton. And even when a Nelson Mandela comes along, his legacy struggles to live up to the man, especially when there is a Jacob Zuma who follows.

Joseph: Agreed. However, it is not an American perspective but universal. Zuma outmaneuvered his rivals. It took too long for Cyril Ramaphosa to reach the presidency. Thabo Mbeki disappointed in several ways, though differently from the abysmal Zuma.⁵

Horvath: I don't place much hope in democracy to produce results. There's not much of a track record to fall back on. Far better to have a republic led by disinterested patriots; but then it's not America 1788.

Joseph: Our hopes for democratic renewal in Africa, especially after 1989, have been largely unfulfilled. I have written extensively on this subject and will synthesize my thoughts in a forthcoming publication.

Horvath: After such a build-up, my question for you is: From where do *you* draw hope? What is your prescription for re-thinking "the post-colonial project" - which has gone on for over a half-century? It is hard to view what has happened during this time as positive. What next?

Joseph: You have joined the conversation and the search for answers! Your comments and questions are highly pertinent. The Dartmouth community, including its alumni, can play a significant role in rethinking post-colonial entities, in Africa and elsewhere. The corrosion of political and economic structures, as President Obama observed in his Nairobi Address in August 2006, "The Fight of our Time", continues unabated. Right now, the very people for whom he cared are battling over the scraps remaining after substantial public funds are diverted into foreign property markets and bank accounts.

In a blurb I wrote for the John Campbell book mentioned in the Narratives, I referred to "many post-colonial entities in which elite predation and popular insecurity are interwoven." I identified this fatal knot four decades ago. It has been pulled tighter in each passing year, strangling millions who seek an exit through dangerous forms of migration, jihadist groups, or criminal gangs. Western powers can rely on Special Forces, drone strikes, and alliances with local militaries to contain them in their impoverished zones. Humanitarian assistance can also be ramped up to fund camps for the displaced and increase humanitarian relief.

On the other hand, we can look at state and governance failures squarely and ask: How can anyone (including ourselves) be secure when so much human misery is fostered by those who ride it to power – and then entrench themselves in opulent positions.⁶ The Myth of Sisyphus often comes to mind. With

online sources include the website of The Brookings Institution and allAfrica.com. More recently, www.AfricaCLI.org was started in association with research assistants to make pertinent documents available. Also important are audio recordings and research files created by these assistants on Carter Center peace and democracy initiatives.

⁵Thabo Mbeki was South Africa's second president (1999-2008). Jacob Zuma, served as president, 2009-2018, and was succeeded by the deputy-president, Cyril Ramaphosa.

⁶ See Biodun Jeyifo, *Against the Predators' Republic: Political and Cultural Journalism, 2007-2013* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2016). For an earlier compendium, see Richard Joseph and Alexandra Gillies, ed., *Smart*

ample external aid, boulders can be temporarily pushed up a hill whose name varies. Today, the mantra is “sustainable development”. What does that mean when sustainability depends on institutions, practices, and norms that are steadily eroded?⁷

The political topography of post-colonial Africa must be rethought; access to knowledge greatly expanded; and institutional integrity and capacity pursued through a variety of ways including partnerships and mentoring. The key weapons for the “Fight of Our Time” are, indeed, non-lethal and abundantly available.⁸

Aid for African Development (Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009). See also the three-volume *Oxford Handbook of Africa and Economics* (Oxford University Press, 2015) edited by Célestin Monga and Justin Yifu Lin.

⁷ See “Pathways from the Pandemic: Africa’s Missing Barn Doors”, <https://www.africacli.org/pathways-from-the-pandemic>.

⁸ These assertions will be elaborated in a document on a collaborative project.