

Divergent views on African colonial history

Introduction

This contribution deals with divergent views on colonial history. It is about recent tendencies in the historiography on Africa and hopefully this will both expose colonialism as such and the way in which historians have dealt with it.

History in itself does not exist as a material phenomenon, and even if any event in history actually happened in one particular way, the later descriptions and the interpretations of the historical events may differ very much.

Colonial history

The history of the individual colonies in Africa was from the beginning written by historians of the colonising power or of other western countries. The indigenous inhabitants in the colonised areas wrote some chronicles and memoirs, but until recently, only very little of what could be called academic historical research. The westerners constructed a history that focused on the successes and failures of colonial enterprise. Typical themes were the civilizing struggle against arbitrary and corrupt native rule and the battle against laziness and aimlessness. This colonial history saw the practices and policies of colonialism, as the driving force in historical change in Africa.

This colonial history was not produced in large quantity until the twentieth century. Prior to that time, the histories of Africa were made by amateur or gentlemen historians, archaeologists and epigraphers and they dealt mostly with the early or precolonial period and only in general terms with the European presence. Until about the middle of the nineteenth century, travel accounts and a few, sometimes rather impressive, missionary accounts were the chief medium for communicating historical information. After 1850 there is a growing number of novels, newspaper articles, journals, and leaked government reports. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, as European imperialism spread into Africa, there were growing numbers of accounts, exposes, and even scholarly made histories. With exception of a few nasty fragments, the realities of colonial rule was rather unknown to the European public. Only from the late nineteenth century larger quantity of details do begin to emerge as archives were selectively collected and opened. Some colonial civil servants began to write about policies and practices in order to influence the home governments. Classical colonial history, written by colonial historians, emerged relatively late in the nineteenth century and already before World War II, there were calls for reconsideration of this then old-fashioned viewpoint, and it was no longer practised after about 1960.

By taking an outside European point of view to the history of the colonies, colonial history saw the forces of change as emerging from the policies and practices of the motherland or eventually from the local colonial government and administration. Already at an early stage it is possible to talk about two principal outlines of history inside the limits of the colonial school of history, namely an empirical and a theoretical. Empirical colonial history sought to develop a chronological narrative based on documentation and observation. Histories of this sort tended to describe the victories and defeats of western economic, cultural, and administrative penetration into the colonial area, seeing this process as part of the metropole's national expansion in competition with other western nation states. Theoretical history on the other hand developed historical accounts on the basis of a certain social concept reinforced by observation. Theoretical histories were based on a number of conceptions ranging from religious predestination over racial and cultural concepts to Marxist and sociological world views. Both types of historical approach, the empirical and the theoretical, reaches out over colonial history and continues into the present.

Autonomous history and localism

The development from colonial history to what could be seen as more or less autonomous history of the African societies began in the late 1950s. This process was widely discussed and the change took place quite intentionally even if there were frequent reversions to old established patterns. Among historians it became accepted practice to work in and out of the nation or society in question, and to view and write its history in

terms that reflected the changes within that nation or society, instead of from the viewpoint of the former colonial master.

The outcome of this paradigmatic change was, that colonialism was placed in a subordinate position compared to the domestic history of the region or the individual countries. Colonialism was no longer seen as the driving force behind historical events, even if its influence was still seen as extremely important for certain developments in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century. The moral and economic values that colonial history had endowed colonialism with were already widely challenged.

One of the new upcoming trends was localism. Local cultural studies were for the most part only indirectly related to colonialism, and because of this, they now provided a possible antidote to the old tendency of seeing colonialism as the dynamic, modernising force. These new studies provided much fresh information about what had happened domestically on the ground during the colonial period. Most results of these localist studies tend to show, that colonial impact had been less devastating than the assumptions of Marxist-orientated exploitation-theories would try to show, but also less constructive than the enthusiasms of some colonial historians had suggested.

The significance of the period before colonialism

It is obvious that colonialism, as a subject of historical interest, has undergone changes in viewpoint and importance. One aspect that to some extent still lacks investigation is the way in which fundamental beliefs and values in native societies have been affected by colonial rule. How much were these societies really changed in their fundamentals though colonialism? Answers on this question has begun to emerge in the past twenty years as historians and anthropologists conducting research in the early period, before 1500, have provided a better understanding of how these indigenous societies functioned. The amount of new evidence and hypotheses accumulated since the late 1960s is impressive. Kinship, craftsmanship, trade, values, and belief patterns have been woven into an image of life that is more complete. As it has also happened through studies of the modern period, African societies have been moved from passive, frameless entities, to dynamic societies with well-developed social values. The task of historian's and other researchers in this early period is far from completed. A greater understanding of what existed in these societies before colonialism appeared, will able us to see how and in what ways colonialism affected them. To a surprising degree it becomes evident, that some of the changes blamed on colonialism was not entirely unknown to the native societies. Robert van Niel has pointed out, that elements such as unequal control over the use of land, coerced labour, taxation in the form of tributes, migrations, paternalism, hierarchies and limitations on human freedom, all existed to a greater or lesser degree in different societies before colonialism entered the scene. Colonialism pulled these problems out of context and often smashed the original sustainability of the societies with great consequences. In most instances, colonialism did not entirely eliminate or substitute earlier patterns of inequity, dishonesty, and arbitrariness, but it always reinforced them and used them to gain its own ends.

Subaltern and Africanist studies

With Africa's independence, historians were strongly moved to find new fields of study that could be defined as both unmistakable African and resistant to imperialism. The works of so-called Subaltern Studies, examines the autonomous domain of subaltern people. This line of study emerged in the 1980s as a critique of newly established nationalist interpretations of history in the new national states and also as a disillusion over the fruits of independence.

Important obstacles for a genuine African historiography have been the catastrophic economic situation Africa faced, particularly since the 1980s, and the harsh material conditions in which African scholars and educational and cultural institutions function. In the decade after independence, Africa-based historians and social scientists made a strong effort to found journals and hold congresses. Their projects have been impossible to sustain. The economic crisis of the 1980s had disastrous consequences for universities and other institutions and has led to considerable intellectual out-migration. Conditions worsened just when a younger generation of scholars, some of them trained in Africa itself, were injecting new ideas and questions into scholarship. The recent structural adjustment programs imposed on Africa by outside lending institutions, are forcing governments to cut services, and do not consider that a vibrant and critical intellectual life helps to distinguish a creative society from one incapable of adjusting its structures.

The burst of colonial liberations after the 1960s led Africanist historians to project backward the idea of the nation. The new states of Africa needed something around which diverse peoples could build a sense of community. The first generation of historians of Africa, seeking to differentiate themselves from imperial historians, were eager to find a truly African history.

The focus on African resistance to European conquest and colonisation both confirmed the integrity of pre-colonial structures and provided a link between them and the modern African nationalist challenge to colonial rule. Resistance was the key element in a continuous narrative of African history. Terence Ranger argued specifically for a connection between “primary resistance movements” in the early days of colonisation and “modern mass nationalism.” Early resistance implied mobilisation across a wider network of affiliation than kinship units or “tribes” provided, and this enlargement of scale created a basis for following modern nationalist movements.

While analyses such as these attempted an Africa-centred perspective, they paradoxically concentrated on European colonialism as the issue that really mattered in the twentieth century. An often populist rhetoric concealed the privileging of African elites by virtue of their anti-colonialism and downplayed tensions and inequalities within African societies.

For the authors of the extensive UNESCO History of Africa, a collective work in many volumes intended to reflect the first generations of post-independence African and Africanist scholarship, the key issue of the early colonial period was the defence of original sovereignty. The editors saw African societies in the late nineteenth century as dynamic, moving toward a form of modernity that tried to maintain sovereignty, but selectively engaged with European commerce, religion, and education. On the other side, the Unesco history has little to say about Africans who conquered other Africans or about the slaveowners in Dahomey and Zanzibar who made other Africans bear the burden of expanding commerce. Sovereignty was not the only issue facing Africans, and the European invasions entered into a long and complex process of state-building and oppression, of production and exploitation, as well as a history of small-scale producers and merchants for whom the overseas connection offered opportunities they did not want to give up.

The meta-narrative of African nationalist victory, and many of the histories of African resistance, have most often been told as stories of men, with a rather macho air to the description of confrontation. Nationalism in the 1950s constructed itself in masculine, as well as class, terms, leaving aside its own more ambiguous history, but historians increasingly has showed that economic and social activity was defined, contested, and redefined in terms of gender.

The heroic narrative fell victim not only to scholars with new questions but also to continuing crises in Africa itself. Growing disillusionment made increasingly attractive the theories of underdevelopment, which located the poverty and weakness of “peripheral” societies, not only in the colonial situation, but in the more long-term process of domination within a capitalist world system. The debate that dependency theory unleashed had the beneficial effect of legitimising among African intellectuals the notion that theoretical propositions were not mere intrusion of Western models on a unique Africa, but actually offered ways of understanding the predicament Africa shared with other parts of the “Third World.”

The issues opened by dependency theorists prompted an increasing interest in Marxist theory among Africanist historians in the 1970s and opened the possibility of a new dialogue across the continents. One of the back sides was, that dependency theory emphasised common subordination and gave little place to African agency.

Recognition of the overwhelming power of the Europeans in the colonial encounter should not negate the importance of African agency in determining the shape the colonisation process. While the conquerors could concentrate military force and defeat African opposition, the maintaining of control demanded alliances with local authority figures.

The economic history of colonisation is as uneven as the geography of power. Colonial powers established islands of cash crop production and mining surrounded by vast labour catchment areas in which coercion and, as time went on, destruction of alternative sources of income were necessary to extract labourers.

Historians have tried to understand the movements that have challenged colonial and capitalist power in Africa. But much of the resistance literature and liberatory history are written from a somewhat idealised and heroic view. What exactly is being resisted is not necessarily clear, and colonialism sometimes appears as a force whose nature and implications do not have to be really understood. The concept of resistance can be

expanded so broadly, that it denies any other kind of life except resistance to the people doing the resisting. Significant as resistance might be, there is a danger that resistance sometimes works a historical concept that may narrow our understanding of African history rather than expand it.

But it does not have to. Scholars have good reasons for taking a wide view on history. Minor actions can add up to something bigger: - desertion from labour contracts, petty acts of defiance, illegal enterprises in colonial cities, alternative religious communities - all these may serve to undermine an unjust regime, raise the confidence of people in the idea that colonial power can be countered, and forge a general spirit helpful to mobilisation across a variety of social differences. The problem for the historian is to link the potentials with the dynamics of the political process, and this problem requires careful analysis rather than teleology or arbitrary selection.

But some of the most interesting recent works of African history actually puts categories of resisters and collabourators in the background, and starts with the question of how rural people saw their own circumstances, made their own choices, and constructed their ideas about society. The relationship of gender issues and colonisation, for example. Some studies has shown that before the conquest, women had once exercised considerable control over farming and the crops they produced, but the expanding slave trade made women vulnerable to kidnapping or to the control of their protectors. In some places colonial rule, after the decline of real warfare and with increased possibilities for cash cropping, for a time gave women space to reassert power within domestic economies, but the subsequent decline of village agriculture and the increasing importance of labour migration made women increasingly dependent on men's fortunes. Other investigations made by female historians, meanwhile, has shown that women sometimes seized niches in the expanding and ill-organised urban economy, as prostitutes and landlords, providing cheap services to male migrant labourers. These studies point on the basic ambiguity in colonial relationships. The women were both subverting the cultural project of colonialism and subsidising the economic side of it.

Some recent studies of colonial situations after World War II do not focus on the parties or elites that took over the state, but on, for instance, Asante separatism in the Gold Coast in opposition to Nkrumah's quest for a unitary Ghana, on the guerrilla movement of the Cameroon, which the French successfully marginalised and destroyed, or on the rural people who were caught in the middle of guerrilla-government warfare in Zimbabwe, and on the squatters who suffered most, and won the least in the violent decolonisation of Kenya. Some of the nationalist parties and movements paid a price for their temporary coalitions during the fight for liberation in the way, that the social struggles they tried to attach to their cause remained unresolved.

For the historian who seeks to learn, what can be learned about the lives, that African workers or market women lived day by day, openness is the first condition of research. The Guinean port worker was not just seeking European wages or fighting colonialism. He may also have used his job for a colonial firm to seek autonomy from his own father, just as his wife may well have been acting within the urban commercial sector to attain a measure of autonomy from him. As a trade unionist, he drew on organisational forms and institutional legitimacy from the French model of industrial relations, but union and political activities also drew on, and contributed to, webs of affiliation, languages of solidarity, and a range of cultural institutions, that colonial officials did not understand and could not adequately monitor. The worker and the market seller were remaking institutions and their meanings even as they used them.

Divergent views on colonial history

History writing on Africa as a separate area of academic study escalated after World War II and this was only partly the result of internal, scholarly developments in academic circles, such as the establishment of African universities, development of the social sciences, interdisciplinary research, and a more global orientation in the Western academic world. First and foremost, it was closely related to external political and ideological developments, like African nationalism, decolonisation, the cold war, development aid, and the rise of new left movements in the Western world. The subject matter of modern African history is of obvious significance, not only for Africans, but also for the self-image of Europe and for the relationship between Africa and the West. The nature of European expansion, the role of capitalism in the development of the modern world, the concept of imperialism, and the global relevance of democracy and of the possibility of socialism. The interconnections between ideology and history are therefore very obvious in this field.

It follows that African historiography is well suited for an analysis of the problem of objectivity in history and some of the idea of my contribution is to discuss how value-orientations, bias, partiality or plain one-sidedness within the different schools of history in this field reveal themselves in the choice of themes, in

causal explanation, in basic concepts and in counterfactual argument. And also to discuss if some kind of partisan or history of liberation could actually be useful or maybe even necessary. The term “value-orientation” could be defined so as to cover interests, ideals, and personal identification. It is possible in very broad terms to distinguish between at least three main “schools,” namely the colonial school, the Africanist school, dominant since the late 1950s, and the radical “neo-Marxist,” “dependency,” or “under-development” school, influential since its emergence in the 1970s.

A presentation will necessarily be rather schematic, and the division into schools must be taken with due reservations. For instance, modern forms of the old colonial school and some western Africanist historians have a lot in common and could very well be grouped together into one “liberal” school, as I actually have done in my Ph.D. on South African historiography. The most significant division lies between this liberal, pluralist tradition and the radical school. Within the radical school there is also big differences and one might have differentiated between an “underdevelopment,” populist-oriented approach and a more straightforward Marxist tradition.

Choice of theme and perspective

History is by nature necessarily selective and “perspectivistic” both in the sense, that it is in effect impossible to give an absolutely total account of any historical event, and in the sense that a starting point must be chosen from which to explain the past. The different schools of African history illustrate this in a striking manner. Colonial historians often had an almost global perspective through their interest in European empires, but this interest was primarily focused on European activity: discovery and conquest, colonial administration and constitutional development, trade and the general expansion of European culture. In the case of black Africa there was a widespread notion that history before the Europeans was insignificant or even non-existent. If we go back to the nineteenth century, we find the famous German historian, Ranke, talking of “Völker des ewigen Stillstandes.” As late as in 1966 the English Professor of Modern History at the University of Oxford, Hugh Trevor-Roper could say:

“Perhaps in the future, there will be some African History to teach. But at present there is none...there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness...And darkness is not a subject of history.”

During and after decolonisation the Africanist school took the lead and the weight shifted over to African activity. Attention was concentrated on the individual colonial territories or on regions and ethnic groups. Special attention was laid down in the study of the precolonial period, in an attempt of restoration of an allegedly autonomous African past. The new national states had a claim of a history of their own and to some degree the got it. Resistance to conquest and African initiative during the colonial period became more significant topics.

Interdisciplinary orientation became a little stronger with the Africanist school. Social anthropology has been of particular importance for this movement, while economic history has been relatively weak. An important theme in this school has been state formation and much of its writing was built up to the happy ending of national independence.

The radical school in African historiography has roots back to the theories of imperialism from Hobson and Lenin, but cannot be seen just as a continuation of this traditions. It has incorporated centre-periphery theories from post-war Latin American studies and includes a whole range of left-wing directions. The perspective is global, and the colonial period was again brought into focus as an important phase in the annexation of Africa as a periphery of the capitalist world economy. Much more attention was devoted to political economy. The role of state power, the emergence of social inequalities and injustice and the special nature of class formation in the colonial situation became dominant themes. The Marxist concept of “mode of production” directed more interest to the organisation of work in comparison with the earlier predominant interest in trade relations. National liberation and social struggle became important topics.

The radical perspective was from the beginning even more interdisciplinary than earlier directions and again scholars from other social sciences have played an important role, but it very quietly gained ground among historians and has been applied to precolonial African history with growing success. In the South African context the radical paradigm today is predominant, but there are merging tendencies between soft radicals and progressive liberals. Such a merging could very well become the backbone of a new hegemonic movement in historiography.

Paradigmatic perspectives

I have no doubt, that this development from colonial through liberal to radical historical research, with its shifts of perspective and priorities, represent significant scholarly advances in the study of African history. To some degree these changes are conditioned by internal developments, by academic discussions over new research results, by struggles of knowledge power in the scholarly infrastructure, by fashion in the discipline. But to a much higher degree they are the result of changing contemporary situations. As the wheel of history is turning the current perspectives consequently change. Colonial historians had to make their careers during world-wide European control, the Africanist school experienced Africans as promising actors in, decolonisation and independence, and the radical scholars observed prolonged liberation struggle, African stagnation and renewed dependence of neo-colonialist centres. Priorities born out of contemporary observations opens new questions about the past. Never the less history is not only innovative but also cumulative and the different schools continue to exist side by side. And most important; scientific and political changes do not lead all historians in the same direction. The most important factor, decisive for perspective and choice of topic is the world-view of the individual scholars and schools of historians concerned, particularly their historical-social identification or straight out their ideological points of contact.

The danger of strong value-orientation in historical research is for instance, that the part-subject studied may be mistaken for the totality and it is rather normal, that a certain blindness for other topics is developed. Thus, colonial historians had problems noticing the early growth of African nationalism and recognising popular resistance. The Africanist school has been tending to neglect topics and interpretations that could hurt African and Afro-American sensibilities, and in its first years the radical school was rather weak on cultural history and reluctant to recognise the importance of topics like ethnicity and race. There even seems to be a certain correlation between value-orientation and the choice of geographical area of research. For example, radical scholars concentrates heavily on southern Africa, where capitalism is more advanced, and the conflict between European and African interests more pronounced and modern class conflict more common. When contemporary conflicts are particularly bitter, as for instance in South Africa, the ideal of "neutral" descriptions seems to become rather illusory and the problems are even greater when we move into causal analysis.

Value-orientation and causal theories

In the historiography of colonial Africa, the discussion on issues like conquest, decolonisation, and the effect of colonial rule on African development has been very important. In that kind of macrohistorical questions explanations about underlying causes can only to some degree be derived from collecting empirical data. In particular there is no given methodological solution to the problem of order and priority of causes. Statements about macrohistorical causes usually has a background in general theory about man, society and historical change. In the concrete historical work such theories are seldom expressed explicit, but they are normally lying implicit in the works, and they are closely tied up with basic value-orientations.

The role of value-orientations becomes particularly explicit in discussions about blame, guilt and burden, when the result of the causes discussed is considered negative on the basis of present-day values. The European conquest of Africa is such a case. Here the Marxist-Leninist theory of imperialism, which is to some extent applied and modified by the radical school in African historiography, provides a causal explanation that ties conquest directly to basic characteristics of the European economic system. It sees capitalism as such as the main cause and as a sufficient explanation of imperialism. Regardless of minor contributory causes, the conquest would have happened sooner or later because of the economic interest of the European capitalists. Other causes, such as strategic, diplomatic or humanitarian for that matter, can only be seen as derived from this primary factor. Marxist theory, with its openly declared political interest, thus serves to provide a ranking of causes and also to show that a unjust European system necessarily had bad effects also for Africa.

The Colonial school of history and Africanist history to some degree also recognise economic motives behind colonial conquest, but in contrast to Marxist theory they are not willing to consider economic factors as more determining than other causes. Liberal causal discussion typically takes the form of factor analysis, where different causal factors, such as strategic, diplomatic, social, economic, act together in different combinations at different times and places in the process of colonisation, and often one can be as good an explanation as the other. Chance and coincidence may play a significant role in such analysis, and personalities and individual human action are supposed to make a decisive difference. Such analysis tends to relieve the European system of blame and questions of guilt is generally not a predominant notion in the

analysis of this schools, where colonial rule is frequently seen as a precondition for modernisation. When this is the case, the humanitarian motivations behind conquest are brought more to the front, and the importance of alliances with African rulers in the process of colonisation is emphasised.

The single most important contemporary discussion in modern African historiography concerns the causes of African economic backwardness. Here it becomes particularly clear how a causal analysis of the past is closely bound up with present blame and strategies for the future. Among colonial historians, and partly among historians and social scientists of the Africanist school, there has been a tendency to seek the main causes of backwardness in internal African conditions, partly in geographical and demographical problems, and partly in the conflict between traditional culture and the demands of the modern state and economy. Against this background colonial rule can be seen as an effort to overcome the internal obstacles to economic development, and the right strategy under independence must be to continue on the course of “modernisation” through further integration into the world market. Underlying this analysis is a belief in the progressive function of capitalism and the concept of a basic harmony of interest between Africa and the West.

However, historians of the Africanist school have often taken a middle position, where African poverty is attributed both to internal and external historical conditions. Both positive and negative effects of colonial rule are recognised, and the aim is to remedy underdevelopment through aid and regulations of the capitalist world market for instance under a “New Economic Order”. Generally, this goes together with a social-liberal position in contemporary western politics.

The radical school, often inspired by underdevelopment- and dependence theory, has mainly looked for the cause of African underdevelopment in external factors, such as the function of the capitalist world market through different historical phases. According to this interpretation there is a basic conflict of interest between the West and the broad majority of the African population, illustrated by the dependent, uneven development during colonial rule. A main reason why Africa remains underdeveloped is that the African upper classes after independence has allied itself with Western capital in conflict with their own peoples. A more or less complete break with the world market through non-capitalist or socialist change, or in the last instance, a transformation of the global system, then becomes the recipe for true development. The radical school, however, has from the late 1970’s been characterised by self-criticism against the tendency to externalise African development problems too much, subsume them under global theories of underdevelopment and neglect the analysis of internal class problems and obstacles to development.

One may ask if it is possible, on this background of African historiography, to carry out even microstudies within the colonial period independent of general causal theories. Historians who claim to work independently of theory may on closer inspection be seen simply to conform implicitly, even unwittingly, to the generally accepted paradigm of their professional or political milieu.

It is very difficult to see how macro-causal analysis, closely tied up with future strategy as in the case of development and underdevelopment can be carried out without the help of theories that are partly based on value-oriented theories.

This conclusion may be distressing to historians trained in the tradition of critical empiricism. In Marxist historical analysis it is obvious that the manifest conception of causal relations distinguishing between essentials and unessentials is closely tied up with the need to justify or find guidance for political action. When the principal reason for social imbalance and poverty is identified, revolutionary strategy for change becomes possible. In contrast a liberal, pluralistic causal analysis will point in the direction of fragmentary reform.

Hopefully this short review will have shown that changing historiographic orientations and shifting paradigms may be an important source of new departures and insights. But it is also clear, that a strong value-orientation involve dangers. It can create a blindness to causal factors that do not fit the theory and a lack of energy in utilising the empirical material, particularly in the direction of falsifying established views.

Values and concepts

In the Africanist school we frequently find a declared cultural relativism, which forms a basis for attack on the “cultural imperialism” of the colonial tradition. Underlying this there is often some kind of agreement with the basic values of political independence, economic development, and cultural identity. In the terminology of the social sciences this is expressed in the concepts of “modernisation,” “nation-building,”

“democracy” and “human rights.” An motivation for this trend of research has been the expectations for democracy in the Third World.

One of the weak points of this view is the contradictions which become visible between such values, and the goal of economic progress. The relationship between technology and culture is seldom clarified, so that the school sometimes appear rather idealistic. The Africanist school decolonised their terminology rather fast. “Africans” came in stead of “Natives,” “ethnic groups” substituted “tribes,” primitive societies” became “technically backward”, later they became “underdeveloped” and finally “developing countries.”

For the radical school a basic value is autonomy, defined as absence of dependence both in the economic, political, and cultural field. This are incorporated in the radical definition of “development,” which then becomes different from “growth,” a problematic which is explained in the concept of “growth without development.” The concept of “imperialism,” is expanded to cover domination also in the cultural and psychological field as well. The concept of “political economy” and “exploitation” implies the notion of the colonial state as an instrument of European capital.

The radical school apparently has the strongest value-terminology, specially when contrasted to the language of the colonial school, but this could simply reflect, that the colonial school had the calm power of the established order, while the radicals had to fight for justice from uninstitutionalised positions.

Such value judgements colour much of the language used in the treatment of the colonial period. What one school understands as “development” another conceives as “underdevelopment.” What is “trade” for one, is taken to be equivalent with “unequal exchange,” by another. African “cooperation” as seen from the colonial school later became “collaboration” for radical historians. Instead of “independence” we got “neo-colonialism.”

It is probably safe to conclude, that any ambition to create a value-free language of historical analysis is illusory and will only lead to cramped specialised dialects, which has actually marked some social scientists writing on Africa. It is in the nature of the historical discipline that it should be able, and be allowed, to function in common language, with due scholarly awareness of its value bias.

Evaluations and alternative hypotheses

General evaluations of colonial rule, for example a valuation of whether colonialism was a bad or a good thing for the Africans, usually involves outspoken instrumental judgements. That kind of evaluations often have a comparative perspective, in that they logically imply, that an alternative, hypothetical course of action would have been either more or less suitable to reach the goal. Even if the artificial construction of alternative historical scenarios in mind experiments is very problematic to any historian, it presumably should be an obligation. To express a certain judgement on the colonial period, commits you to have some idea about what would have happened without colonial rule and this kind of counterfactual alternatives in themselves usually are strongly influenced by the world-view of the author.

Behind negative evaluations on the colonial period lies the hypothesis, that there existed a possible hypothetical alternative that might be called autonomous development including modernisation, self-rule, and an independent economy. Based on a positive evaluation of the development potential of precolonial societies and taking into account the actual development history of some African kingdoms in the nineteenth century such historians will talk of an original “trend” towards state-building, technical progress, and social change which was interrupted by colonial rule.

Colonial historians in turn base their positive evaluation of colonial rule on the hypothesis, that the most plausible alternative was, what we may call peripheral stagnation, absence of modernisation and no real autonomy. Colonial historians with a negative evaluation of precolonial African societies emphasise tendencies towards social dissolution and inter-African wars and project these tendencies into the twentieth century and the question is asked: What would have happened to the hundreds of African mini-societies elsewhere in the twentieth century without colonial rule?

In the historical works of the last years, since the destruction of a real existing socialist alternative, many writings has been following a more moderate Africanist line of thought with a less pronounced value-orientation. Colonial governments may not be uncritically accepted, but are criticised for specific sins of imperfection.

Some of attempts of counterfactualisation could be labelled as retrospective utopianism or presentism, where the hypothetical alternatives are nothing but unhistorical projections into the past of contemporary values which did not exist in the historical situation.

The problems arise when we try to specify the criteria for hypothetical alternatives that were objectively possible. In addition to the difficulties of defining counterfactual processes arises another problem. How can technological development be measured against cultural losses, and how can the gains of one group be measured against the setbacks of another? Despite these difficulties it is neither desirable nor necessary to give up these kinds of experiments.

However, even these limitations and obvious dangers inherent in strongly bias-coloured research, the conclusions concerning value-orientations with regard to choice of topic, causal analysis, basic concepts, and counterfactual argument must be mostly positive, namely in the sense that value-orientations have been an important engine of scholarly progress, because changing perspectives have been a main source of new insights.

Changing views on colonialism after the decline of Marxism

Historians, like most intellectuals, are very sensitive to ideological fluctuations, and the view on colonialism has been changing.

In some of the articles on colonialism in the 1974-edition of the great British lexicon, Encyclopaedia Britannica, written by recognised scholars, it is possible to see the influence of the intellectual, Marxist renaissance of the late 1960s and the 1970s, which challenged the liberal dogmatism of the late 1940s and the 1950s. The 26-page article on colonialism is analysing the subsequent rise and fall of colonialism. It is authored by Harry Magdoff, who also used it as the head essay in a book on Imperialism. The entire article achieves an admirable fusion of fact and analysis, providing an exceptionally useful tool for reference and education in the subject. But apparently something happened very quickly with colonialism or at least with the most influential view on it. If one inspects the Colonialism-article in the 1979-edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica it is a whole other matter. The discussion of neo-colonialism has disappeared. Also, the US-imperialism after the Second World War has gone. Same thing with the Vietnam war. Instead has come a predictable, anti-Soviet piece. Magdoff's section is cut off at 1914. Magdoff's original article is substituted by Webster's much less qualified but apparently more objective piece.

A comparison of the two articles might provide an explanation of this new so-called objectivity. Magdoff's article makes it possible to grasp the overall history of modern colonialism. In the post-war period of decolonisation, we see why outright colonialism is replaced by neo-colonialism, with the role of the old European empires being assumed by the United States, whose economic hegemony is enforced by a world-wide network of military bases and the struggle against national liberation movements.

Webster's analysis is typical, liberal "objectivity." It pretends to be empirical, with a selective composition which, on the surface, indicates no fundamental organising theory. The causes of events are listed, with no priority or apparent connection among them. Slightly below the surface, however, one can easily detect an anti-Marxist message. The United States now appears not as a neo-colonialist power, but primarily as a fighter against colonialism, whether European or Soviet.

Central to this liberal methodology of "objectivity" is the postulated absence of any kind of meta-historical theory, as though facts were merely being recorded and ordered in an ideological emptiness. For example, Magdoff readily acknowledges that the term and concept of neo-colonialism are highly controversial.

Webster disposes of this critical term and concept by omitting them entirely from his discussion.

Magdoff discussed "nationalist guerrilla forces fighting for liberation" in the Portuguese colonies in Africa, and noted that "Portugal has sent large armies to its colonies." Webster mentions their struggle only in these terms: "Portugal found itself mired in a series of colonial wars."

This kind of rewriting of the history of colonialism happens all the time, since history is always seen and used ideologically from a present situation. An assault on the anti-imperialistic consciousness of 1960s and 1970s has been going on for several years hand in hand with the rewriting of history. Some has seen this as part of an offensive in the interest of free-market neo-colonialism. It can of course also be seen as just a new fluctuation in the dominating world-view of the historians, as a reaction on the former rather popular Marxist exegesis.

Liberatory history and history for the people

The struggle for national self-determination of the peoples of underdeveloped countries and former colonial areas did awake new consciousness and was responsible for new approaches, new techniques of viewing events and enriched historical literature as a reaction to the former official, colonial histories. However, much of this work has been produced by Western scholars committed to the concerns of Third World peoples. While their perceptions and analysis are valuable, it is essential that intellectuals of Third World

countries apply themselves to the analysis of their own historical reality. Historians of the Third World should have the primary responsibility for revisiting their own countries' past to eliminate distortions imposed by colonial scholarship and redress the imbalance inherent in conventional historiography. One of the tragedies of the colonised people has been their alienation from their own past. They have been denied the memory of their own people. The history they have been taught has been alien to their own culture. One of the tasks of local, progressive historians, therefore, has to be to present the people with its own history written from a people's point of view in order to make the past useably, so history can serve as a guide to the present and to the continuing struggle for progressive change.

The concept of an openly and clearly biased or partisan scholarship may be difficult for an orthodox academician to accept, but it might be essential for the third world historian at this point in time and its immediate goal could be to counter the weight of neo-colonial ideas masked as "objective history." The writing of history necessarily involves judgement. But many retreat from making explicit judgement perhaps out of fear or from a sense of inadequacy or because of a typically Western mental conditioning, that makes a fetish of objectivity and equates this with truth. But the historian cannot avoid value-judgements, and therefore it is better that he should be openly committed to a progressive philosophy and code of ethics. The historian who has no philosophical or ethical principles also lacks criteria for measuring change or continuity.

Conclusion

In Africa, the encounters of the past are very much part of the present. Africa still faces the problems of building networks and institutions capable of permitting wide dialogue and common action among people with diverse pasts, of struggling against and engaging with the structures of power in the world today. Africa's crisis derives from a complex history that demands a complex analysis: a simultaneous awareness of how colonial regimes exercised power and the limits of that power, an appreciation of the intensity with which that power was confronted and the diversity of futures that people sought for themselves, an understanding of how and why some of those futures were excluded from the domain of the politically practicable, and an openness to possibilities for the future that can be imagined today.