Africa as laboratory and the complexity of epistemic decolonisation

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As authoritarian regimes in North Africa tumble and the Arab Spring rumbles on, the wave of 50th anniversary celebrations marking the formal ending of earlier authoritarian regimes – colonial rule – continues its predominantly southward progression across the continent. This year is the turn of Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda and Algeria and next year will see Kenya reach fifty years of independence. This milestone has contributed to a growing body of work and commentary in academia, the media and in the arts that seeks to re-evaluate African pasts, presents and possible futures; not least in terms of ‘revisiting’ the material left-overs of the colonial era (see below). In the following literature review I would like to highlight a few examples of this work, more specifically in relation to how it – intentionally or otherwise – broaches vital epistemological and ontological issues pertaining to how Africa and the ‘African’ have been, and continue to be, constructed as objects of knowledge. An important frame for this discussion is the challenge laid down by postcolonial theory concerning the need for epistemic decolonization, or that which Chakrabarty (2007) has influentially posited as the project of ‘provincializing Europe’. In urban studies, for example, scholars such as Ananya Roy (2009) and Vanessa Watson (2009) argue convincingly of the need to dethrone the ‘Western city’ from its over-dimensioned position of dominance in guiding urban planning and generating urban theory. Such a project of ‘provincialisation’ sets in sharp critical relief and challenges the proclivity for equating difference with lack; a long running and powerful narrative in the colonial and post-colonial contexts which posits Africa as an impeded or flawed object deemed rightfully open to the European ‘will to improve’ (Li, 2006).

The enterprise of actively trying to engineer a ‘new Africa’ has long been a preoccupation of the West, especially since the ‘turning point’ in colonial policy from the 1930s towards a focus on African welfare and development (Pearce 1982). Indeed, producing Das Neue Afrika was, for example, how the illustrious German architect and planner Ernst May chose to frame his own planning work carried out at the behest of the Ugandan colonial state during the mid-1940s. His work, which included designing African housing estates (Siedlungen) in Kampala and Jinja, sought – through careful technological calibration – to socio-spatially engineer the African’s ‘journey’ from ‘native’/traditional to modern (Gutschow 2012). The entrenched
nature of the trope equating Africa with ‘lack’ and of the hegemonic idea of what the end-
point of that ‘journey’ would necessarily look like is vividly captured by recent media
coverage which writes with incredulity over the reversal of fortunes of former coloniser /
colonised in the wake of the Euro-zone crisis (see the case of Portugal / Angola reported by
BBC). But even in such cases, the notion of lack is not so much erased by any epistemic
decolonization, but more so by the belated appearance of ‘knowable’ signifiers of advanced
Western modernity; urban redevelopment, glass fronted skyscrapers, electronic gadgetry, and
business suits (see for example SVT’s documentary *Den Nya Afrika*, 2011).

With these reflections in mind, it should come as no surprise that Africa has long been
imagined by Western political and scientific institutions through the metaphor of the
*labatory*. It is, however, a metaphor that can both chime with but also unsettle estimations
of Africa and the ‘African’ as the necessarily improvable ‘Other’. The difference essentially
turns on the epistemological inflection of the metaphor, particularly the extent to which it
employs Western categories of social science when assessing non-European contexts and
cultural practices. Four recent publications reanimate and in some instances elaborate and
complicate this metaphor of Africa as laboratory during the colonial era; particularly in terms
of highlighting the problematic project of epistemic decolonisation.

*Congo (Belge)* (Lannoo Publishers 2010) is a colossal crocodile-clad tome of photographs
by the Magnum photographer Carl De Keyzer. Using the *Guide du Voyageur au Congo* from
1958 as his way-finder, he documents the material remnants of the Belgian colonial system;
skilfully aiming his lens at colonial villas, factories, statues, bridges, churches and heavy
industrial machinery. Photos of the latter are carefully composed to capture the embossed
names of towns such as Charleroi as if to underscore the idea that Belgian Congo was very
much *manufactured* in Belgium. De Keyzer’s work triggers a complex spectrum of
impressions and associations; initially of material and socio-economic decay but even a sense
of recent abandonment despite Congo having gained its independence already in 1960. The
only exceptions to the image of disintegration are images of immaculately maintained
churches and Jesuit missions, but in the broader sweep of dilapidation these seem to constitute
only spaces of temporary respite and unearthly salvation from the otherwise pervasive sense
of the disorder of things.

But disorder adjudged according to what epistemic culture? Michel Foucault (1970) opened
his own study of the *Order of Things* by referring to Jorge Luis Borges’ Chinese
encyclopedia in which animals are grouped into what are for subjects of Western modernity
unfathomable sub-categories; belonging to the emperor, embalmed, tame, sucking pigs,
sirens, that from a long way off look like flies. Foucault’s point was that some epistemic cultures distribute things into categories that make it impossible for the uninitiated ‘to name, speak and think’ that which presents itself as radically different. In the accompanying textual fragments from the colonial and post-colonial eras De Keyzer seems to invoke his own *Kinois* encyclopaedia; a Suzuki Alto car, 5 tons of cement, one Kinshasa-Brussels-Kinshasa air ticket, one Leica laser meter and a complete Zain kit. Further textual fragments and photographs are invoked seemingly to completely disrupt the order of things; condom lubricant used as shoeshine, brake oil as disinfectant, toothpaste as haemorrhoid treatment, a swimming pool used as a basketball court, a funfair train carriage used as a study. What is one to make of all of this? Does the profusion of juxtapositions so disturb the Western order of things that one is left unable to name, speak and think? The metaphor of Congo as laboratory is never explicitly invoked by De Keyser, but it infuses these images showing how Congolese must employ trial and error, experimentation and attention to local context and detail in order to connect seemingly incompatible bits and pieces at hand into fungible constellations to support their livelihoods. The notion of the former Belgian Congo as laboratory is rather less apparent, especially if *Congo (Belge)* is seen together with its sister volume *Congo belge en images* – a collection of almost caricature black and white photographs from the dawn of the colonial era showing decapitated rhinoceros heads, chained Africans, starched white colonial dress, hand amputees and colonial officers being carried across rugged terrain. Such imagery suggests that the early colonial project was not so much based on consideration to contextual detail, technological cosmopolitanism or bio-political calculation but rather carried on through exercising brute force and sovereign power over a seemingly undifferentiated *bare African life*. For this reader at least, De Keyser’s most powerful photographs are those that intimate the continued dominance of this rationality of power in the post-colonial era; not least a photograph capturing, or provoking, the anxious gaze of a Congolese woman clad in a skeleton-print dress.

But the notion that Colonial power imposed already fully formed Western forms and scientific norms unilaterally and without consideration of context is precisely that which the historian Helen Tilley seeks to problematize in *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, development, and the problem of scientific knowledge, 1870-1950* (University of Chicago Press, 2011). Tilley instead emphasises the dialectical relationship between colonisation and the production of knowledge, particularly in terms of the development of new scientific methods, inter-disciplinary approaches and epistemic pluralism. Identifying colonial Africa as a laboratory for scientific research, social engineering, development experiments and social
criticism, the book’s seven chapters examine the laboratory metaphor in relation to empire building, development, environment, medicine, race and anthropology. She charts the central role of one scientific discipline – geography – in facilitating the ‘scramble for Africa’ and the importance of another discipline – anthropology – for subsequently eroding colonialisms foundational principles. The intimate relationship between geography and empire is it should be noted, well researched terrain, including such eminent studies as Felix Driver’s Geography Militant (2000). But in Tilley’s hands the rapid proliferation of European geographical societies in the late nineteenth century – growing from only twelve in 1869 to ninety-nine in 1890 – is accorded catalytic and substantive rather than subsidiary agency in the European ‘scramble’. A defining moment in this process was the 1876 Geographical Conference orchestrated by King Léopold of Belgium, himself a member of a number of geographical societies. The conference had four goals; to take stock of existing geographic, scientific and ethnographic knowledge on central Africa, to discuss the best means to explore the continent’s interior, to debate the function and location of field stations, and to discuss the structure and goals of an International Africa Association to guide these endeavours. An important conclusion reached by the delegates was that naturalists and scientists would and should play a central role in ‘opening up’ Africa but that the establishment of field stations threatened to spark territorial claims. Britain further argued that international tensions were inevitable because of the difficulty of separating pure geography and survey from commercial geography. These fears transpired when Britain refused to join the IAA and the latter permitted its affiliates to set-up field stations under national rather than multinational auspices; many of these being established by countries such as France and Belgium who Tilley, perhaps over zealously, argues were less opposed to combining scientific expedition with territorial claims. In the first decades following the partition of Africa, scientific enterprise – principally geography and biomedicine – remained tightly wedded to imperialism; not least in terms of the production of detailed geographical surveys and the large-scale sleeping sickness commissions launched between 1902 and 1914. But what can be said concerning the methods for constituting the African as an object of study? Tilley argues that while there were already calls for an end to ‘unscientific’ and pejorative a priori assumptions of the ‘nature’ of the African at the close of the 19th century, the mobilisation of a scientific machinery of knowledge production only first gained real momentum with the initiation in 1929 of what was to become the African Research Survey. This monumental survey, headed by Lord Hailey and published in 1938, was conducted throughout Africa (albeit with an emphasis on British dominions) with the goal of furnishing the colonial powers
with detailed information on shared ‘problems’ and the measures considered most propitious in addressing them. To redeploy Foucault’s turn of phrase, its more specific goal was to make it possible to ‘name, speak and think’ Africa, the ‘African’, and development in a manner that invoked the authority of laboratory knowledge. While the survey mandate again wedded science with empire, Tilley elucidates how research conducted under its auspices became increasingly subversive to empire. Indeed, finding truth claims and ontological understandings wanting when confronted with empirical findings, a range of scientific disciplines such as anthropology and ecology (which were professionalized in Africa) increasingly challenged existing stereotypes such as the supposed intrinsic fertility of tropical environments and the unproductive and wasteful indigenous agricultural practice. Methods of analysis, particularly those which emphasised interdependence, interrelations and studying the African in wider sociological and environmental terms, contributed to an epistemological shift in the manner in which the African was conceived and perceived. Here, Tilley essentially identifies a partial epistemic decolonisation during the late-colonial era; a shift from seeing and acting upon the African as bare biological and physical life to conceiving them as social and cultural agents. The crucial consequence was a growing appreciation and codification of vernacular and ethno-science which, for example, posited the need to incorporate subaltern knowledge and practice when formulating developmental interventions. In other words, while work conducted under the umbrella of the African Survey developed colonial capacity ‘to name, speak and think’ difference, so too did it begin to undermine its mandate to ‘act’.

The notion of Africa as laboratory is further examined in Osten, Karakayali and Avermaete’s *Colonial Modern: Aesthetics of the Past, Rebellions of the Future* (black dog publishing, 2010). Here, French colonial Africa is posited as a laboratory for Western modernity in the sense of providing a theatre for European planners and architects to more freely apply their ideas; from houses with underground garages to novel mass-housing designs that were re-imported into France after WWII. In terms of the production of knowledge they, like Tilley, identify an epistemological shift involving an ‘anthropological’ turn, but here in the realms of architectural and urban planning theory and field practice. Avermaete, for example, deploys the terms ‘travelling perspectives’ and ‘nomadic experts’ not only to indicate the emigration of western ideas to the colonies but, more importantly, to extricate how the ‘colonial context’ came to widen the scope for what counted as architectural knowledge and expertise to include the contextual vernacular knowledge of non-professionals. This quite fundamental break with Corbusier’s universalist CIAM doctrine was precipitated by the more humanist approach of the younger CIAM architects, including
Georges Candillis and Shadrach Woods, which prioritised contextual attention to social, economic, physical and psychological subject conditions. The notion of ‘habitat’, which synthesised this new approach, was presented at the 1953 CIAM IX meeting at Aix-en-Provence in the planning grids which incorporated detailed ethnographic study of bidonvilles in Casablanca and Algiers. But although Colonial Modern posits this shift from dwelling/machine to habitat as the harbinger of CIAM’s ultimate demise in 1959 and the colonial experience as instrumental in changing the treatment of political and social problems in the metropolises, it differs from Tilley’s analysis by seeing the act of ‘learning from’ the vernacular not as epistemic decolonisation but actually as a means to reinforce colonial structures of rule by re-incorporating learnt lessons into oppressively top-down urban planning projects; perhaps most paradigmatically encapsulated in the Carrières Centrale mass-housing project in Casablanca which still stands today.

Some fifty years after decolonisation, however, Von Osten writes in Colonial Modern how she found it almost impossible to find or recognise these districts; appropriation by residents had rendered them virtually unrecognisable. This contrasts starkly with De Keyser’s imagery where, despite signs of surface re-appropriation, the material left-overs of the Belgian colonial era seem as frozen-in-time as the preserved animal specimens at the Agronomic Institute at Yangambi photographed by De Keyser. Whether this says more about divergent post-colonial trajectories of these former colonies or about the selective focus of the Western gaze is unclear but perhaps worthy of further consideration.

What these three books do, however, is to provoke further consideration of the archaeology and architecture of scientific knowledge and the contentious issue of how to ‘name, speak and think’ difference without essentializing or erasing difference. The complexity of these issues is all too evident in my own area of research on colonial and postcolonial urban planning in the South where ontological and epistemological debates intensify over questions such as how one should ‘name, speak and think’ African modernity against the backdrop of the ‘slum’, informal urbanism and appropriated remnants of the colonial era (Davis 2004, Place 2004, Harrison 2006, Byerley 2011). Here, appraisals celebrating such milieu in terms of ‘difference’ rather than lack or as alternative modernities sit somewhat uneasily with local representations and narratives coloured by a strong sense of ‘failed expectations of modernity’ (Ferguson 1999). An interesting and visually strong example of recent work that injects a significant degree of ambiguity into any representation that would too easily replace difference for lack is the recent publication of The Beautiful Time: Photography of Sammy Baloji (Jewsiewicki 2010. The Beautiful Time is showing throughout 2012 at the Museum for
African Art, New York). Here, and in a sense visually replicating James Ferguson’s study of the complexity of everyday lives in the wake of industrial collapse on the Zambian Copper Belt (Ferguson 1999), Baloji’s photographic study of the material vestiges of ‘yesterday’s modernity’ in Katanga’s former industrial heartland (Jewsiewicki 2010: 9) powerfully illustrates the ambiguous zone between freedom from colonisation and the postcolonial collapse of industrial landscapes instituted during the colonial era. It also emphasises the complexity of the challenge of epistemic decolonisation and provincialisation of Europe in an ever more deeply globalised world.

References

De Keyzer, C. Congo (Belge) (Lannoo Publishers, 2010)