A Milestone in the Study of Africa

So, the Africa Review of Books (ARB) is born! The road that has been traveled to produce this maiden edition of the Review has been a long one and the obstacles that have had to be surmounted numerous. In fact, at a point, such was the magnitude of the difficulties encountered that some were tempted either to give up on the project altogether or to postpone it indefinitely or even modify it so radically as to alter its identity as an autonomous product of the African social research community. But many others also held tenaciously to the dream, convinced that the impeccable ideals that underpinned it necessitated the investment of all the energies required to bring it to fruition. That is why the appearance of this first issue of the Review carries with it a sense of historic moment which, hopefully, will also mark the beginning of a new phase, indeed, even a turning point in the study of Africa. It is for this reason too that there is a pervasive sense of celebration accompanying the issuance of the maiden edition of the publication.

There are other reasons for celebrating the publication of the maiden issue of the Review. From an institutional point of view, the birth of the publication not only represents a major success in realising one of the major strategic projects of CODESRIA in its role as the apex pan-African social research organisation but also marks the triumph of the collective will of African scholars as manifested by the Council and the victory of perseverance over despair. We in the CODESRIA Secretariat share fully in this sense of celebration and, in doing so, thank all the those who by deeds and/or encouragement contributed to the project as a sustained initiative capable of contributing to the transformation of the study of Africa. The quality and range of the contributions and exchanges that took place, and the sheer commitment that was displayed even in those early days meant that the publication was conceived from the outset as a “collective venture belonging to the entire African social research community in all its diversity. Little wonder then that when an unscrupulous attempt was made to hijack and privatise the Review in the course of 2000 and 2001, it met with stout, all-round resistance which also signalled the need to accelerate the production of the publication. An open call for submission of proposals to host the Review was issued out of which the FSS and CRASC emerged as the institutions selected, the former with overall editorial responsibility, the latter with responsibility for the French language editorial content. The Review will be published twice yearly in the first instance; the ambition over the long haul is to make it a quarterly publication.

The emergence of the ARB should serve to fill several important gaps in the study of Africa. For one, it will function as a critical multidisciplinary forum for debate on trends and directions in African Studies. For another, it will bring interesting work published in Africa but which are not sufficiently well-disseminated to the attention of a wider reading audience both within and outside the continent. Also, by the range and diversity of books which it is able to cover through the reviews that it publishes, the publication will not only help to alleviate the worst effects of the book famine that continues to afflict some parts of the continent but also serve as a useful reading guide to students and staff alike as they wade through the vast literature that is produced annually on Africa. Furthermore, it will provide a forum for reviews from Africa of studies published on the continent by the big African Studies community that exists outside the region. In serving as a critical platform for responding to these studies, the Review is expected to contribute to redressing the growing culture of scientific impunity in African Studies in which excessive liberties are taken with evidence, method and theory on a scale not comparable to what goes on in the study of other regions of the world. It is in this sense that the Review can be expected to be a standard bearer in the study of Africa. In this role, it will regularly draw attention to interesting new ideas and innovations and, at the same time, challenge the tendentiousness, lack of rigour, and reliance on a shaky empirical foundation that is all too prevalent today. To do so with credibility, the entire editorial team of the Review will strive not only to ensure that the materials included in the publication meet the highest standards of quality but also reflect the best of the diverse interests and perspectives of the social research community.

Obviously, the sustainability of the Review will depend, in large measure, on the quality, quantity and diversity of the contributions that are received. It is, therefore, essential that all contributors to the publication meet the highest standards of quality and, at the same time, challenge the tendentiousness, lack of rigour, and reliance on a shaky empirical foundation that is all too prevalent today. To do so with credibility, the entire editorial team of the Review will strive not only to ensure that the materials included in the publication meet the highest standards of quality but also reflect the best of the diverse interests and perspectives of the social research community.

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