

Post-continentalism: An Appreciative Response to René Odanga

René Odanga has sharp eyes and a coruscating pen. It is an indictment of African Studies that two years of participation and observation is enough to confirm the Emperor's continued state of undress. Odanga's passionate critique is fuelled by exhaustion and a deep sense of déjà-vu, along with occasional moments of horror and disbelief. There is much for students of global Africa to learn, and unlearn, from this piece and its heartfelt anger.

Odanga pithily distils what many scholars—of all shapes, colours, and disciplinary persuasions—will have felt this year about the institutional narcissism of Harvard faculty and an elite African Studies journal. Both have been exposed as propping up a global academic system that seems ever more hierarchical, geographically stratified and status-obsessed. Researchers on every continent find themselves caught in this intellectual spider's web, with its bibliometric logics, racial divides and recursive coloniality (Shahjahan and Edwards 2021).

But Odanga goes much, much further. His Swiftian denunciations of the relentless discourse of crisis, of cyclical conversations and institutional gatekeeping, are damning. The 'misrepresentation of Euro-America's monologue as dialogue' by African Studies is a damning indictment indeed. Odanga has little time for Anthropology: the most 'irretrievably colonial of disciplines ... a rubbish heap'. He even mocks the possibility of an African 'African Studies'.

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As Odanga acknowledges in his many valuable footnotes, much of this has been said before, loudly, and insistently. So why restate it again? Because the Emperor's experts seem to keep defending their opinions. Odanga devotes two paragraphs to Césaire's 1955 vivid denunciation of colonialism. Césaire damns not just the 'colonists who flog' but also the 'goitrous academics, wreathed in dollars and stupidity' and the 'ethnographers who go in for metaphysics'. Reflecting on the importance of this work, Kelley, suggests that Césaire's 'Discourse on Colonialism' is best understood as a 'declaration of war', as 'poetry and therefore revolt' (Kelley 2000: 28).

If Odanga is fomenting insurrection by tossing poetic Molotovs, it is because only polemic seems up to the challenge. How else to respond to the recursive, persistent institutional gatekeeping of academic knowledge production about and on Africa? There is a growing recognition that African academic journals and knowledge ecosystems are rendered structurally invisible to many Euro-American 'dialogues' (Harsh et al. 2021). The scholarly world's two main citation indexes (Scopus, owned by Elsevier, and Web of Science, owned by Clarivate) control the flow of academic legitimacy and reputation through their algorithms and

data infrastructures. Their 'global' indexes deploy a raft of quality thresholds and selection procedures that discriminate against journals published in Africa. The measurement of academic credibility through citations entangles African researchers in an exhausting publication game defined by an impossibly narrow set of supposedly 'international' journals (Mills et al. forthcoming).

Rather than try to address the many different elements of Odanga's polemic, I want to focus on just one aspect: his reflections on the representation of 'African' agency within comparative studies of African politics. With colleagues, I have been studying the role of higher education scholarships and research collaborations in China's diplomatic overtures to African states. I was grateful to be provoked by Odanga's bemusement at the seemingly naive and—to his ears—dehumanising language of political sciences. He expresses his shock at receiving an invitation to a webinar talk on 'Rethinking African Agency in Africa-China Relations'. How is it that African agency cannot just be taken for granted, but instead needs to be 'discovered, debated, redefined, then rethought'? Is this not, Odanga reflects, 'really about whether the African is human at all'? I too admit to puzzlement at this assertion of 'agency'. For Odanga, it raises the corollary question: the possibility of no agency and thus the denial of subjectivity. He poses a stark question: What happened to our shared humanity? One might respond that this language of agency is itself a

response to scholarly analyses that depict African states and societies as trapped within, and defined by, structures and discourses not of their making. Perhaps the scholarly assertion of agency, however clumsy and seemingly obvious, is also an attempt at affirming humanity? When feminists foreground women's agency in their writing, they are championing a different way of seeing and inhabiting the world, not putting female agency and subjectivity into question.

Part of the problem may lie in disciplinary concepts such as 'soft-power' (Nye 1990). Joseph Nye's influential formulation focuses only on how states exert power over other states. African scholars, such as Lina Benabdallah, have nuanced this, showing how Chinese soft power can be relational and social, deployed within diplomatic fora and nurtured through personal engagements (2020). Benabdallah admits there is more to do in understanding how soft power is experienced, deployed and responded to by African actors. It is this commitment to foreground the bilateral and reciprocal aspects of 'soft power' that leads to seminars and webinars on 'African agency'. It feels unfair to suggest that those studying Chinese soft power in Africa are questioning the very nature of African humanity. Rather, they are seeking to rework a scholarly discourse that renders political agency a zero-sum game.

Odanga goes on to question the 'Africa+1' discourse within geopolitics, asking why a diverse continent of fifty-four countries and a billion-plus people gets juxtaposed against a single external actor, as in China–Africa, UK–Africa, US–Africa. Here it is helpful to read the analyses of scholars such as Fola-shadé Soulé-Kohndou (2021). She explains why, in the context of the

new international scramble for political influence in Africa (and its mineral resources), the continent's political leaders are turning up to these 'Africa+1' platforms, such as with China and Russia. These have become the pivotal diplomatic spaces for both attracting potential foreign direct investment and achieving domestic policy goals. It is of course equally telling that no one speaks about Chinese or Russian 'agency'. This is presumed and taken for granted. The challenge here is that the scholarly framing of 'agency' within comparative political studies and international relations is limiting and restrictive.

It may be that African leaders participating in 'Africa+1 summit diplomacy' have to bite their tongues about the highly unequal power dynamics that saturate these pageants. Diplomatic etiquette probably means ignoring any real or insinuated 'thingification', the subject of Césaire's contempt. The real-politik of '+1' summitry however points to the possibilities of what could be described as post-continentalism, new Cold-War realpolitik with emergent forms of expansive political solidarity that seek to re-imagine a Global Africa (Mazrui 1994). Geopolitical calculus is, admittedly, a long way from the Pan-African vision of Nkrumah, Fanon and Césaire. But Pan-Africanism was, and remains, about much more than state-centric political geography. Reflecting on Césaire's intellectual and personal roots, Diawara (1988: 6) reminds us that his vision for 'Negritude was bigger even than Africa, that we were part of an international moment which held the promise of universal emancipation'. Odanga is still right to call out the risks that accompany scholarly discourse, including the demeaning geographical reduction of Africa, even as Africa+1 'post-continentalism' emerges as a political

strategy to be deployed in bilateral diplomacy and financial negotiations. There is more to do in crafting an analytical language that evokes these new political geographies.

The representation of political agency is only one part of Odanga's larger critique, and there is much more in his piece to reflect on. By reminding us that words create worlds, Odanga helps to both dismantle the master's house, and craft a different discourse as we rebuild. For this we should be grateful.

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2022 Thandika Mkwandawire Memorial Lecture & Roundtable Panel Discussion

Theme: **The Feasibility of the Developmental State Project in Africa**



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Prof. Fiona Tregenna
Keynote Speaker



Professor Fiona Tregenna holds the DSI/NRF South African Research Chair in Industrial Development, heading this centre of research, training, and public engagement. She is also a Professor of Economics at the University of Johannesburg. Her research focuses on issues of structural change, industrialisation and deindustrialisation, and innovation and technological upgrading. She has published widely in leading journals, received awards and grants for her research, led large research projects, co-edited several books, and serves on the editorial boards of various international journals and book series. She sits on many panels, boards and councils, including the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Advisory Council advising on trade and industrial development across Africa, and advising South African President Cyril Ramaphosa on economic policy as a member of his Presidential Economic Advisory Council. Fiona has advised international organisations such as UNIDO, UNCTAD, the United Nations University and the ILO, and has contributed to a number of flagship United Nations reports. She has a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Cambridge.

Theme of Memorial Lecture:
“The ‘Impossibility Argument’ and the Developmental State in 21st Century Africa”

Dr Grieve Chelwa
Panelist



Dr Grieve Chelwa is a Zambian economist with research interests centring on African Development and Political Economy more broadly. He currently serves as the Director of Research at The Institute on Race, Power, and Political Economy at The New School. He's previously held academic positions at The University of Cape Town and at Harvard University, where he was the Inaugural Postdoctoral Fellow at The Center for African Studies. Dr Chelwa is a frequent commentator and blogger, and some of his writings and opinions have appeared in the New York Times, the Washington Post, Business Day, BBC, Lusaka Times, Bloomberg, and Mail & Guardian, among others.

Theme of Memorial Lecture:
“What does the Ethiopian experiment of developmentalism mean for Mkwandawire’s model of an African Developmental State? Lessons and critical reflections”

Dr Eyob Balcha Gebremariam
Panelist



Dr Eyob Balcha Gebremariam is the recipient of the 2022 Thandika Mkwandawire Prize for Outstanding Scholarship in African Political Economy and Economic Development. He is a Research Associate at the Perivoli Africa Research Centre, University of Bristol and an Adjunct Professor of African Studies at the Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies, in Bologna, Italy. He received a doctoral degree in Development Policy and Management from the University of Manchester, UK. He taught African Political Economy and African Development at the London School of Economics and Political Science (2017-2021). He also held a Matasa Fellowship position at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, UK (2016/17). His research areas include African political economy, the politics of development, the politics of knowledge production in Africa (decolonial perspectives), young people’s engagement in politics and youth (un)employment.

Theme of Memorial Lecture:
“Agriculture in Africa’s Development Planning”

Prof Akua Opokua Britwum
Panelist



Akua Opokua Britwum is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Gender Research, Advocacy and Documentation (CEGRAD) at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. Her publications cover gender-based violence, gender and economic participation, trade union democracy, and labour force organisation in the informal economy.

Theme of Memorial Lecture:
“Dreams of Green Hydrogen”

Prof Daniela Gabor
Panelist



Daniela Gabor is a Professor of Economics and Macrofinance at UWE Bristol. She studies financial globalisation, money, and decarbonisation from a critical macrofinance perspective.

Dr Ndongo Samba Sylla
Panelist



Ndongo Samba Sylla is a Senegalese development economist. He works as a Senior Program and Research Manager at the West Africa Office of the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation. He co-authored “Africa’s Last Colonial Currency: the CFA Franc Story” (Pluto Press 2021)