Chabal's Sweeping *Bon Sequitur*

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Patrick Chabal would not mind the hybridity of terms in my title. His central message is that nothing is as obvious as the imposition of formal systems makes it seem. Systems of rationality with a self-styled ‘universality’ serve certain projects well and marginalize those of others. Those of others, however, are not pure in themselves but mix and match influences and impositions to take something original into the future. His new book is a natural follow-on and development of *Africa Works* but is something which deserves an influence well beyond African studies. The Zed series title is ‘World Political Theories’ and Chabal’s account of epistemologies is what I concentrate on here, exploring how it helps illuminate debate in social sciences and even, for instance, my own discipline of international relations. In international relations, the established methodological traditions are based on scientific rationalities (Nicholson 1992), more qualitative reasonings based on European Enlightenment thought (Thompson 1992), post-war ‘critical’ philosophic thought derived from German sources (Wiggershauss 1994), postmodern thought derived from French work (Bleiker 2000), and the debates based on the history and philosophy of social science derived from Popper, Kuhn and Feyerabend (Hollis and Smith 1991). There is nothing derived from outside Europe and the United States – certainly nothing from Africa.

Like *Africa Works*, however, there is a tension at the heart of the new book. Chabal justifies Africa-generalization but warns against Africa-essentialism. This is signalled both at the beginning and the end of the book, but the line where one blurs into the other is never easily drawn –
just as in *Africa Works*, a book that established a general principle of rationally-based African informality, there was a tension between what was a general principle and what was a universal condition. The lines of crossover, where rational though informal systems interact with formal ones, and are sometimes suborned to formal ones, were never really elaborated. Chabal is at his best when establishing a critique of orthodoxy and regularity, and is not always as accomplished in the recognition of modern institutions that work – under certain conditions anyway – in a regular manner. But, as an exponent of critique and particularly as an exponent of the immense humanity that should be located at the heart of the Africanist project, Chabal is the master.

That humanity is best expressed in this new book in chapter 7, ‘The Politics of Suffering’. This is as much a lament as an exposition. Chabal is deeply touched by the suffering found on the continent. In the section on illness he is at pains to express how the psychological (168) impact of illness is different to that in the West. He has words to say about how this affects views of treatment for HIV, not to mention views on the worth of modernity. The phenomenon of ‘denial’ is, by Chabal, given both a cultural dimension and the more obvious dimension of there simply not being modern treatment within accessible reach – meaning, as often as not, simple geographical reach. The danger here is that the suffering African becomes the circumscribed African – circumscribed by his or her own illness and the social context of that illness.

I mention this simultaneously humane and circumscriptive section because it illustrates Chabal’s approach to the question of agency. There is much African agency in the coping with adverse conditions. He wishes ‘to honour the day-to-day lives of those who strive to maintain human dignity in the face of overwhelming odds.’ (16) But he also wishes to ensure that agency is recognised as a complex condition. He does not call for its problematization, but he advises that approaches to agency should be cautious. As a result, the book has the tense air about it of celebrating something different while setting out its inhibitions. It is both wonderful and frustrating reading. Yet Chabal is probably right. Precisely because of this, and because of the tension it generates, it falls to Chabal to
demonstrate a means of negotiating it. In particular, he needs to negotiate whether agency changes when suffering and when smiling. There is, however, a lot of suffering in his book, and relatively little smiling.

Smiling is reflective, when not putting a brave face on suffering, of pleasure. But this expands and problematizes Chabal’s account of dignity in the face of HIV. The dignity allows, perhaps demands, denial. But denial is not something simple. In the face of suffering, the last redoubts of pleasure are to be safeguarded against any amelioration, censure or demand for change or even its obliteration. There is a crossover here, and it is in the realm of crossover that Chabal is weakest.

Why deny in the face of death? Here, the twentieth century fixation with forms of psychoanalytic understanding suggests a future project. What Paul Ricoeur called an ‘ontology of disproportion’ is what may be said to be at work in the case of denial which derives from opposed sites of pleasure and suffering unto death. There may be, in Pascal’s term, a ‘wounded cogito’ at work – where traditional joy in sex, in pleasure, confronts what is, in its current deadly form anyway, a modern pandemic. At this intersection between traditional practice and modern demands, the cogito knows what is going on, but is wounded and will not change. The clash between old and new has induced an ontology of disproportion.

Now all this must be taken with care. Contemporary neo-Freudian approaches to the Western malaise cannot be superimposed upon Africa. But this is not to say that there is not, within the rubric of suffering and pleasure, scope for African-based explorations of what ontology, and agency in their positive, benign and malign forms can mean.

The Chabal thesis is essentially that there are small-scale environmental formations of ontological responses to new systemic and structural forces; and, sometimes, retreats from these forces into behavioural enclaves derived or deduced from tradition. These formations and retreats may be logical responses to pressures, though not rational in modern universal senses. What the Chabal book accomplishes as a contribution, therefore, to ‘world political theories’ is the following:
1. It is a contribution to the ongoing largely Western-centred debate on the primacy of either ontology or epistemology. Chabal’s is an ontological claim with diverse epistemological considerations.

2. It is a statement that, although acted upon, the African is not acted upon *structurally*, i.e., not acted upon to the extent that he/she will respond in terms of what the structure expects.

3. It is a constructivist statement, but one which is not a universal statement of constructivism. Chabal’s discourse/s are varied and not ‘rational’ in terms of universal systems of thought.

4. It suggests, perhaps with its stress on the psychological, inflects – and it is this inflection I have taken up – the possibility of work along psychoanalytic lines. There is a wounded *cogito*, but this should not be seen in neo-Freudian Lacanian or Kristevan terms – except where pleasure and smiling reflect forms of *jouissance*, the slightly or more fully guilty sense of pleasure that carries in this case a stamp of personal accomplishment and, in that sense, of authenticity, even if it means death.

None of this may be what Chabal intended. What I want to say is that his book contributes to wider, non-Africanist debate. It is a serious contribution to such debate, but it also reveals the paucity of contemporary conceptual apparatus in Africanist studies that still relies on forms of social anthropology and reductionist forms of political science. For its possibility of broadening social science so that it takes seriously African examples and conditions, alongside those more familiar to the West, for its critique of established thought within a great deal of the Africanist community, and for the agendas it opens up, this book continues the ‘tradition’ begun by *Africa Works*. I think it is a wonderful and powerful book.

**References**


