

AFRICA IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: THE FRONTIER AS CONCEPT AND METAPHOR¹

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Frontiers, like the spaces and territories they delineate, are about geographic transcription as much as about social spaces and mental maps that shape and define 'otherness'. The frontier, as a concept and metaphor, provides valuable insight into the recent evolution and ambiguities associated with representations of Africa within international relations. Three broad threads may be identified: the metaphor of a 'distant abroad', historically rooted in depictions of Africa as the dark continent; new humanitarianism and its emphasis on Africa as a 'significant other', and the new global frontier narratives, strongly evocative of Jackson Turner's interpretation of 19th century US history. This last thread relates in practice to two sets of scenarios: the intensification of Africa's international integration as a provider of commodities, or alternatively insertion through the diversification of African economies away from commodities, in conjunction with innovative initiatives and processes. Depictions of Africa also point to a fault line that permeates the study of Africa in International Relations: the propensity to focus on the ideas and impact of exogenous actors as opposed to Africa's role and impact on the latter

Africa as a 'distant abroad': the Dark continent syndrome

In the wake of the end of the cold war, the dissemination of depreciated representations of Africa coincided with perceptions of the continent as strategically insignificant to Europe and North America, economically marginalized and unlikely to seize the opportunities that the dynamics of globalisation could offer.

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The idea of a 'marginalisation' of Africa gained currency during these years. The notion originally drew its meaning from scholars like Bill Warren who, in the 1980s, interpreted marginalisation as 'an anarchic, chaotic, unplanned, sometimes brutal, but nevertheless vigorous ... process' of increasing integration (Warren 1980: 223). This legacy was increasingly overlooked as marginalisation became a rallying point for the study of the restructuring of core-periphery relations within the international system (Clapham 1996; Boone 2012: 623–626). The marginalisation of Africa, Claude Ake perceptively observed in 1993, amounted to a process of 'vulnerable incorporation' of the African continent into a highly integrated and forever shrinking world' (Ake 1996: 9). The metaphor, he added, also served as a vehicle for a 'highly visible negative image [whereby] Africa is being construed as the ideal of how not to be'.

The dissemination of marginalisation narratives stimulated the revival of old Eurocentric images and racial stereotypes. These, initially popularised by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, were no longer the exclusive preserve of Western popular culture. Old Victorian clichés also converged with neo-Hegelian representations of Africa as a continent of barbarians, devoid of any history and culture.

Africa as a ,significant other': new humanitarianism

The first decade of the 21st century inaugurated a succession of readjustments in international perceptions of and interactions with Africa. New forms of multilateral initiatives, such as the Millenium Development goals, combined with fresh African diplomatic moves, crafted an alternative path to the Africa fatigue and disengagement mantras. The expression of humanitarian concerns towards Africa simultaneously became an issue prone to global consensus at a time when the Europeans and North Americans were bitterly divided, both domestically and between them, over the US intervention in Iraq. The momentum, fuelled by perceptions of Africa as a continent devoid of much strategic relevance, culminated in 2005, the year of Africa.

Africa's build-up into an emblematic expression of global morality reached it apex during 2005, as Britain's presidency of the EU and G8 offered additional leverage to capitalise on this trend. Blair's parting shot came with the release, in March 2005, of the

recommendations for a global action plan prepared by his 19 member-strong Commission for Africa which, through a combination of ‘moral exhortation ... argument and ... analysis’ undertook to clarify the UK’s approach to politics and development in Africa (Porteus 2008: 62). The Make Poverty History Coalition, established in 2003 to mobilise public opinion around the G8 summit, was also particularly active. Spearheaded by 540 religious groups, trade unions and non-governmental organisations, it was committed to a broad agenda on social justice for the global poor, but was in effect primarily associated with Africa (Harrison 2010: 391–392). An unprecedented rise of transnational ‘celebrity humanitarianism’ also contributed to public opinion mobilisation through media interviews, concerts, rallies, and a heavy moralizing discourse on debt forgiveness and increased aid (Njorge 2011: 239–41). Mobilization climaxed during the Live 8 concerts that were made to coincide with the G8 summit in Gleneagles and attracted over two million participants in Europe, North America, Russia and South Africa.

Africa as a global frontier

Descriptions of Africa as the ‘world’s last frontier’, the ‘untapped’ or ‘overlooked’ continent are not new. They are a reminder of the days when explorers, soldiers, traders and settlers claimed, each in their own way, to have ‘discovered’ Africa and its people.

Fresh interest for the African ‘frontier’ was prompted by the discovery of substantial new oil reserves in the 1990s. By the turn of the 21st century the combination of technological progress and a favourable business environment accounted for West Africa’s depiction as ‘the last large unexplored energy frontier’. The development of new technology made it possible to tap deep and ultra-deep offshore oilfields, prompting a reappraisal of the reserves and production potential of the Gulf of Guinea. Extremely favourable business terms were negotiated with African states, thanks to depressed oil prices.

By the mid-2000s already, the engagement of China and the BRICS in general operated as a key driver in the process of the deepening and broadening of Africa’s integration in the global economy. The BRICS’ quest for resources, markets and global alliances contributed to redefining the concept of a ‘new frontier’ beyond the realm

of commodities. The potential of African domestic markets was rediscovered by private investors across the world, now lured by the solvency of new 'middle' classes and the assumption that the rise of the active population, unparalleled in other world regions, were more an opportunity than a burden.

The dynamism of the African 'frontier' was, then as now, as much about foreign engagement as about intra-societal dynamics and innovations associated with enhanced connectivity and the defragmentation of markets. The processes at play challenge conventional wisdoms and images, including the idea of a new scramble that would leave Africans as mere bystanders. Driven by commodities and supported by the massive engagement of Chinese firms and migrants, the 'go out' strategy of the Chinese has contributed to transform Africa into a global arena where new strategies and paradigms are being tested. China's demand for energy and raw materials has terms of trade between manufactures and raw materials that, in spite of a brief downturn in 2008–2009, are unprecedented in the history of the African continent. Trade flows, greenfield investment and infrastructural development underscore strategies that revolve around investment as much as they relate to deep transformations in the aid-business nexus.

The financial crisis of 2008–2009 was a first challenge to the rising Africa narratives. By January 2009 Africa's equity markets, save for South Africa, had suffered a dramatic outflow of liquidity within a few months. Five years later, as investors were again eyeing stock markets in sub-Saharan Africa, the continent was more modestly presented as offering 'the ultimate in risk versus return' ratios, thanks to the combination of 'some of the world's riskiest markets' with opportunities for hefty profits (Wigglesworth 2013).

With the collapse of global oil and commodity prices since 2013, the embedded limitations of the African frontier 'thesis' have been highlighted. This also invites to draw comparisons with the West frontier thesis of Jackson Turner. For the American historian and his followers the 'Western frontier' was both a moving space and a force for integration, owing to the development of individual rights, self-reliance and ultimately a distinctive American identity (Mikesell 1960: 62–74). Turner, however, overlooked the dark side of a process that

also involved the destruction of ecosystems and the extermination, or marginalisation, of the indigenous American-Indian people.

The related notion of pioneer front (front pionnier), as developed by French geographers, similarly focuses on territorial expansion, without endorsing the teleological assumptions of the Western frontier thesis. Pioneer fronts merely refer to the penetration and appropriation of new spaces for mining or agriculture, along with the building of infrastructure and the establishment of new communities. Field studies conducted in Brazil and other countries in Latin America, but also in Indonesia and southwest Côte d'Ivoire, have come to the conclusion that they involve a high risk of marginalisation for local communities. They also carry high environmental risks, whenever agricultural expansion and the quest for natural resources target hitherto uncharted territories and ecosystems. The study of the pioneer front also calls attention to the expansion of the control exercised by a core over its periphery, a process that has contributed to revive the metaphor of a new 'scramble' for Africa based, this time, on 'the extraction of Africa's resources [through] renewed exploitation, accumulation, marginalisation of African economic actors ... and the corruption of African elites' (Southall and Melber 2009: 404). With the dramatic fall of Africa's mineral commodity prices during 2015, such a debate is more relevant than ever...

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