



REVIEWS

Africa on the cusp of natality – from Afropessimism to African becoming

A Review of Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr's edited volumes:

To Write the Africa World (Polity Press, 2023a) and *The Politics of Time: Imagining African Becoming* (Polity Press, 2023b)

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In 2011, *The Economist* coined the term 'Africa Rising' to denote and celebrate the comparative economic growth and the wave of democratization in sub-Saharan Africa from the early 2000. The epithet also came with the optimism that the economic growth would be sustained over time and eventually lead to the transformation of the lives of Africans on the continent, especially through the emergence of a stable middle class. However, this optimism undergirding 'Africa Rising' collapsed under the weight of the multidimensional realities in Africa, from war to poverty and governance failures in various hues.

Africa, and its myriad of postcolonial predicaments, has been the focus of consistent visioning and optimistic planning, from the Lagos Plan of Action to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and from the African Renaissance to the various Afro-vision from Afrofuturism to Afrotopia. It is within this tradition of theorizing the future of the African continent that one can situate the two wide-ranging and brilliant volumes co-edited by Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr: *To Write the Africa World* and *The Politics of Time: Imagining African Becomings*. Both volumes were the outcomes of a series of thought-events – the Ateliers de la pensée or workshops of thought – held in Senegal in 2016.

Indeed, if there is a word that captures the sense of optimism that suffuses the two volumes, it is the French word *jouissance*. And this is for many reasons.

One, in every sense, the two volumes, according to the editors, constitute part of the ‘ongoing renewal of French-speaking Afro-diasporic critical thinking’ (2023a: 2), and I will have a little more to say about this shortly. Two, the philosophical development of *jouissance* in continental philosophy, from H el ene Cixous to Jacques Lacan, and from Deleuze to Zizek, privileges the idea of an explosive indication of limitlessness, especially in the female experience (for Cixous) and the fracturing of the homogenizing structures of signification that guarantees identity for the subject (especially in Roland Barthes). No one can mistake the significance of this philosophical reading of *jouissance* in any of Mbembe’s writings, for instance; and definitely in these volumes.

The optimism involved in organizing the workshops and consequently in putting the two volumes together is so riveting and contagious that any act, or to quote Nadia Yala Kisukidi, one of the contributors, ‘blows of critique’ applied to their review would look cruelly subversive. The objective of the two volumes is clearly stated, in *To Write the Africa World*, as that of inserting Africa into ‘the time of the world’ (2023a: 2), or, from *The Politics of Time*, ‘investigating the present and future of our world from the vantage point of Africa’ (2023b: viii). And this is because, as the editors insist, ‘there is no longer an African or diasporic question that is not at the same time a global question’ (5). And this instigates the possibility of being able to ground the ‘interconnection between the future fate of both Africa and the world’ (2023a: 2). This possibility, according to them, derives from two ‘historical displacements’:

Europe is no longer understood or viewed as the center of the world even though it is still a vibrant and relatively important and decisive actor on the global stage. For its part, Africa – and the Global South in general – has seen its status continue to rise in importance as one of the principal theaters where, in some distant point in time, the future of the planet will more than likely play out (2023a: 1).

And in *The Politics of Time*, the editors argue that the new forms of life, thought and the social emerging from the African continent not only lead, on the one hand, to the need to oppose the ‘thematics of closure and vertigo’ arising from two narratives of disenchantment with the possibility of Africa making progress – an apocalyptic pessimism and a narrative of technological messianism. The new forms, on the other hand, ‘call for an unprecedented renovation of paradigms and methods, of analytical tools, vocabulary, and discourses – in short, they call for the creation of new languages and bodies of knowledge with the power to mobilize the archives of the Whole-World [*Tout-Monde*] to provide new intelligibility for the various upheavals in process’ (2023b: ix). Thus, the politics of time indicates the deliberate politicizing of time ‘beyond the alternatives of apocalypse and technolatriy [*technol atrie*]’ (2023b: x). Politicizing time therefore entails envisioning ‘a politics of the future...by reopening a space for the unpredictable and the possibility of an infinity of becomings’ (2023b: xi).

It is most certainly not a question of liquidating the past, but rather of attaining that juncture where different times meet, the precise point of their entanglement, of seeking out new ways to inhabit the world and new chains of relations. The time for refutation is over. It is now time for conditional affirmation – that is, for the exploitation of other possibilities for a future yet to be written, a future with neither promise nor guarantee, an emergent future rich in possibilities and charged with life (2023b: xi).

These two volumes comprise various contributions that theorize afresh the idea of African *natality* – how Africa can begin new beginnings attended by theoretical narratives of emergence. Given the two historical displacements mentioned earlier, and ‘the Africanization of the global question’, new challenges are thrown up for rethinking Africa’s place in the world. And yet, the body composed – through the workshops and the two volumes – to think together and on common ground is essentially French in ways that locks out other critical regions of the African world and the commonality of the colonial experience (even if not its homogeneity). For instance, while theorization about Africa and its future has received a surfeit of contributions from the Anglophone intellectuals, the Lusophone axis has been significant because of its conspicuous absence. Rethinking the place of Africa in the world requires multiple perspectives, even the Afropessimistic ones.

Natality needs to be grounded in reality in the same way ululation of utopia must first emerge from the forlorn knells of dystopia. I mean to say that the miracle of new beginnings becomes even more miraculous when situated within a grievous present that is to be transformed. In Arendt, natality is conceived as the *political* action par excellence. Politics and the political have consequences for moving from the present to the future. The volumes theorize Africa’s place in the world as a distinct theoretical possibility without an equal dose of engagement with the actually existing Africa in the throes of insertion into a neoliberal globalization and the specter of Empire. One significant point to catch a glimpse of the present challenges is precisely the current fate of the humanities – ‘the disciplines of the imagination’ (2023a: 3) – everywhere and especially on the continent, being subjected to critical neoliberal reimagination in the image of capital.

The global present is an imperialistic one, subject to the ever-present antics and dynamics of Empire. And this fact conditions what any theorization of African self-fashioning and self-writing must engage with. We need, in other words, to take seriously Felwine Sarr’s admonition, in *Afrotopia*, to carefully negotiate the double movement of ‘a faith in a brilliant future and a consternation when confronted with a seemingly chaotic present fraught with a number of different convulsions’ (2019: xi). No one is sure what the current ‘creative gestation’ – part of which are these two volumes – will give birth to. To focus on the utopic alone is a dangerous affair because it might eventually signal rushing critical thoughts into ‘no-place’ (*ou-topos* rather than *eu-topos*). And as Derrida warns us, ‘The trauma remains traumatizing and incurable because it comes from the future. *For the virtual can also traumatize*’

(2005: 104). The fundamental question, however, is how we can achieve the future without the benefits of any transcendent guarantees.

One interesting thing about these two volumes – indeed about all edited volumes – is the possibility of juxtaposing the editors' summation of the objectives with the contributors' different perspectival engagements with them. We therefore encounter – and space does not permit a more rigorous interrogation of – more nuanced analyses in chapters that elaborate, reinforce, iterate the objectives, or those that depart, undermine or even betray them. My favorite chapter, in *To Write the Africa World*, is Ndongo Samba Sylla's 'Demographic Challenges and Technological Mutations: Does a Good-Paying Job Have a Future in Africa?' and, in *The Politics of Time*, surprisingly Mbembe's 'Circulations', and again Sylla's 'Currency, Sovereignty, Development: Revisiting the Question of the CFA Franc.' These chapters, like others like them, betray my methodological respect for case studies that undermine monolithic theorizing and identify specific problematics and offer nuanced resolutions outside of abstractions. These contrast with majority of other chapters that theorize from the perspective of what I have called elsewhere 'the big abstracts' – universals/universalism, culture, development, human, woman, democracy, freedom, Africa, etc. (2018: 110; 2023: 229).

The task of theorizing Africa in the time of the world cannot be hitched to the red herring of 'Africa as a world apart' (2023a: 1) to be able to reckon Africa and Africanity *differently* in world time. And so, the only Africa that exist is both the continent presently wallowing in the throes of bad governance and global imperialist dynamics, and the one 'that will be created' (2023a: 2) through a critical political and intellectual interrogations of the trajectories from now to then. And the challenge remains that of excavating an African episteme that guides Africa's place in the universal, without getting lost in Africa's particularity. In this wise, Africanity becomes the strategic positioning of Africa in the time of the world.

References

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