

spectacle” to that end. Mizejewski’s micro-analysis is insightful; Kibler’s study, however, offers a more gripping account of female performers in the early twentieth century. Her rendering is more sure-footed historically when she explores the intersection of high and low culture and discusses that era’s gender and racial discourses. Kibler’s examination of the vaudeville audiences is unique, and her material vividly reveals how female performers, both on stage and off, contested the status quo of power relations.

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Democracy and the Colonial Heritage in Africa: Revisiting Mamdani’s *Citizen and Subject*

Mahmood Mamdani’s *Citizen and Subject* has become one of the most talked-about contributions to African studies in recent years. The review article which follows represents a commentary on Mamdani. It amplifies substantially a short review which has been published previously in the *African Sociological Review*. That review ventured to make a number of critical comments on the book which dispute some of its emphases while elaborating on its themes. This article will attempt to develop these points somewhat further. The idea, however, is not to take away from the value and significance of Mamdani’s book which represents an important and original contribution.

Others have in fact disputed its originality. As history, Mamdani’s concentration on “decentralised despotism,” in effect the indirect rule systems that were in force during much of the colonial period, is of course not original. There are accounts still worth reading that understood this system well, perhaps the more so for being close to the colonial period in time, such as Thomas Hodgkin’s *Nationalism in Colonial Africa*, Michael Crowder’s *West Africa under Colonial Rule* or William Derman’s *Serfs, Peasants and Socialists*. It has long been known that the French, who were rather uninterested in questions of legitimacy, would occasionally turn a favoured cook into a chef du canton just as they later turned Bokassa into a president and emperor. Even for South Africa, a number of writers have looked at the subject, with David Welsh’s study of the Shepstone system in Natal a particularly important pioneering volume. Norman Etherington is one historian who long ago recognised Natal specifically as an influence on the colonial state emanating out to the rest of (at least) British Africa.

But Mamdani, as he has had to point out repeatedly, is not really trying to compete with the historians. He is instead doing what they do so rarely, apply their wisdom effectively and systematically to contemporary problems. In this case, his work is really directed towards the 1990s debate on democratisation

in Africa. It stems from Mamdani's frustrations at the glib and superficial institutional prescriptions of the Washington consensus that seem irrelevant to African reality. Methodologically he poses against these positivist dogmas, surviving with surprisingly little development from the classic modernisation literature, the weight of lived process. Democratization cannot exist outside of this process; it has to be an effective intervention into the political consciousness and political lives of people with a real history.

It also reflects his awareness that the "civil society" movements aimed at authoritarian regimes in Africa have been heavily based on the urban middle class. Demands on their part for elections, a free press, constitutional guarantees, are significant but it is less clear how they can have an impact on impoverished rural people. The problem of authoritarian rule in their lives lies elsewhere. The limited success of liberal reform in some African countries and total failure in others, has often stemmed from failure to engage the rural masses and their problems. Shrewd politicians such as Biya in Cameroun, Eyadema in Togo and Moi in Kenya have been able to turn their patrimonial followings against the reformers effectively. Mamdani wanted to establish some kind of analysis that could bring to bear the limitations of these movements as well as the real lives of the African population. How can they too become citizens? As such his intervention is both timely and critically important.

Having said this, however, I am skeptical of whether it is really possible to jump as quickly as does Mamdani from the subjects and citizens of colonial despotism to the current problems of the African countryside. I think too much water has run under the bridge. Mamdani recognises of course that, particularly in radical states, authoritarian indirect rule gave way to authoritarian direct rule where peasants were administered from the capital in the hopes of rapid development and forced modernity. He tells us that "no nationalist government was content to reproduce the colonial legacy uncritically. Each sought to reform the bifurcated state that intentionally crystallized a state enforced separation, of the rural from the urban and of one ethnicity from another. But in doing so each reproduced a part of that legacy, thereby creating its own variety of despotism." (8) These episodes may have been sufficiently profound, in fact, to make it impossible to return to earlier circumstances or to isolate out the decentralised despotism component, even in countries that have never really experienced a radical pressure from the centre. One obvious task that Mamdani indirectly proposes is the need to revisit regimes like those of Nyerere, Nkrumah and Sekou Touré with new questions stemming from the problematic of African democracy. What Mamdani has told us is one important part of reconstructing a democratic itinerary but it is not the whole story.

In fact, the relationship between centre and periphery has become far more complex and intertwined. Are rural Africans today held down largely by

the power of their chiefs and the weight of custom? If we look at the work of A.E. Afigbo on the warrant chiefs of eastern Nigeria, a particularly blatant case of colonial political make-believe, we find that these chiefs won a remarkable amount of legitimacy fairly quickly despite their lack of respectable origins. In effect, a social process from below of considerable complexity was certainly at work already in the first generation after conquest. In Senegal, it was precisely when Léopold Senghor, the ultimate citizen, reached out from the world of the *quatre communes* to establish effective linkages with Muslim brotherhoods influential among them suggests that his political power waxed mightily. This was paralleled by successful African nationalists all over the continent. Struggles of resistance in the countryside, less frequent than one might expect, were rarely unambiguously anti-chief even if they often held out some ideal of legitimacy from custom and the past. These are West African examples and certainly it is harder to disentangle the two colonial realms there even historically, let alone today. In West Africa, cities are very much less colonial creations and the mix of indirect and direct rule does not divide so neatly into the rural and the urban. The long history of coastal intermediary trading strata based in towns with a capacity to reach both towards colonial and indigenous social and political forms is important and was never entirely effaced. In general, it is much harder to separate out the subject and the citizen, despite the terminology originating from the French colonial system in this region and the efforts of the colonial regimes.

However, if we turn elsewhere, distinctions are also not so neat. As a recent study of rural Zimbabwe by William Munro, aware of Mamdani's work, points out, interventions from the central state there did not unambiguously build up the power of customary rulers. Munro sees these interventions as a succession of failed hegemonic projects. But the issue is not only one that exists in the political realm. I would argue that the *creeping influence* of the money economy, occasionally propelled by the sudden infusion of capitalist investment, as well as all kinds of contradictions inherent in the indirect rule project, is also operating under the political surface. Land rights, often assumed to be the most important prerogative of "traditional authority" (Mamdani, 17) are in reality almost everywhere a kind of mish-mash in which capitalist market values and various interpretations of customary law are mixed up. Attempts by the state to create a consistent and logical new land tenure system, notoriously for instance in Kenya from the time of the Swynnerton Plan in the 1950s and 1960s, have generally been subverted from below by the most successful rural accumulators whose ambitions are socio-political as well as economic. I am not sure how far the reconstruction of the "White Highlands" under Kenyatta can be elucidated through applying Mamdani's ideas on rural despotism. The logic of commons enclosure in classic capitalist form has tended to elude rural Africans even in this very commercialised zone — and yet they hardly just cling to an age-old past at the

feet of their elders.

“The line between those who labor on the land and those who do not” (61) is being crossed by ordinary people in their millions every day, both men and women, and on journeys that reach across international barriers and even continents. And they are crossing it in ways that are messy and highly confusing to us social scientists. Munro looks to writers such as Michael Watts and Sara Berry who emphasise the limited capacity of the state to order the countryside — “inconclusive encounters” in Berry’s terms (Munro, 363) — and the confusing and original mix of rights that are typical of contemporary Africa. Mamdani himself, whose research on these issues for Uganda is extremely interesting, refers to a “gulf between what is legal and what is real.” (135)

Jean-François Bayart, of course, has suggested that the reality does not tend to approach, as Mamdani proposes, a more or less deracialised form of the old authoritarian system but rather the irregular growth of a rhizome-like political culture where something neither modern nor customary flourishes largely underground. Unlike some Africanists, who enjoy celebrating this remarkable exotic as a sign of African originality and initiative, I suspect that it represents a powerful barrier to economic and social development beyond a certain level. Perhaps the truth lies in between, or in both Bayart and Mamdani. There may be rather a value in understanding the mosaic of differently derived values and strategies in line with the experience of Europe in the centuries of movement towards capitalism, although of course Africa benefits or suffers from being part of a world where capitalism has as a whole already triumphed, making original solutions on the ground far more difficult to prevail.

Mamdani evaluates decentralised despotism to some extent in terms of its counterweight, resistance from the masses. The resistance, however, such as the Rwenzururu movement, often reproduced the social forms which Mamdani deplors. In part, this reflects the fact that these social forms were not simply imposed from on top; they were also created in an organic way from below. Rural society, as he acknowledges, became stratified and often highly exploitative internally. In part, studying the limits of resistance reflects the necessity of any way forward engaging a wider horizon than that of any specific rural area. As Mamdani himself stresses, popular rural mass movements readily become ethnically or religiously specific and reach out only with difficulty to a wider audience. In summary, Mamdani’s contribution is vital but only part of what we need to consider in order to map out the potential for democratisation in Africa in the twenty first century. He does not put enough weight on post-decentralised despotism and the ways in which the colonial structures have evolved (or decayed) in looking at contemporary problems.

Mamdani argues that decentralised despotism is modelled on South African systems of segregation which in turn gave way to apartheid. He

suggests that apartheid was in fact the less ambiguous form of indirect rule that was finally imposed on black South Africans, given its greater ruthlessness and consistency. Making this connection is an important and valuable one and it certainly offers one way of integrating, or perhaps re-integrating, South African scholarship into the African mainstream. Here again, however, I feel that he has perhaps elided too many historic and sociological layers that require attention in jumping from the Shepstone and equivalent systems to the mid-twentieth century if what one wants is a window clearly viewing the South African conundrum as a whole.

In South Africa, the Shepstone system was arguably not the dominant state system. What was dominant was the world the whites created for themselves where the state focused on an elected and relatively internally-democratic parliament and the sustenance of a conventionally hegemonic capitalist society with appropriate institutions. This is why the formidable Dame Margery Perham, to whom Mamdani gives a bit of attention, disliked South Africa so intensely when she visited it; it represented a direct slap in the face to her beloved tropical trusteeships to the north for whom she was a great propagandist and theorist. The dominance of the white centre reflects the far greater efficacy and internalisation of capitalist forms, institutions and ideas in the society. South African "exceptionalism" can be an excrescence of a racist mindset but it is up to a point a required way of comprehending South Africa to the extent that one takes the idea of capitalist transformation and a capitalist mode of production seriously as analytical tools. It is not merely a piece of chauvinistic arrogance.

The analogies of South African pre-1948 Native Affairs Department administration, inconsistent, underfinanced and pragmatic as it was, and indirect rule elsewhere in Africa, are rather closer than when one interposes the apartheid system. It is true that apartheid was about consolidating homelands into "national" ethnic states in which chiefs were turned into politicians. But was the real heart of the South African system the homelands? Ivan Evans' recent book, *Bureaucracy and Race*, brings back with considerable rhetorical elegance the world of "native administration" in the 1950s. This work supplements the well-known studies of Hindson, Posel and Mabin and reinforces the point that the most important thing about apartheid was what happened in South African cities. Evans does see the pre-apartheid state in South Africa as operating along the lines of decentralised despotism but the massive construction of townships in the cities for blacks under the auspices of the National Party represented an acknowledgement of the necessity of some kind of stable black labour force for the system of capital accumulation to work. Joyless, soulless, created at minimum expense, these townships were intended neither for citizens nor subjects. Evans poses instead the model of a kind of administrative dictatorship often oiled by corruption, the originator of the "world's largest finger-print collection." (91) As Mamdani says, apartheid

urban policies represented a “frontal assault on the residual rights of the African population.” (102) In fact it is the impossible social position in which this placed black South Africans that shaped the character of resistance to apartheid in the 1970s and later.

At first, the state was able to effectively block that resistance, led primarily by township bred school pupils, through the angry counterweight of migrant workers just as the Mamdani thesis predicts. That is essentially how the 1976 insurrection was put paid. But by the middle 1980s, not only was this no longer effective but resistance was spreading to more and more remote parts of the country. Although it is somewhat crude as historical analysis, there is much truth in Harold Wolpe’s analysis, based on the theory of articulating modes of production, that the older system in South Africa was breaking down. By the 1980s even the countryside wasn’t really the countryside anymore with any genuine peasant economic basis for existence. Apartheid was about shoring things up — and it failed. It looked especially menacing and potentially triumphant when it coincided with the unprecedented boom in world trade during the decade of the 1960s. Yet through most of its era, up to 1960 or thereabouts and then again in the reform phase from the middle 1970s, it was transparently shot through with compromise and contradiction, whatever the Strijdoms and Verwoerds found it comforting to tell the white public on the hustings when election time came around. Although sometimes glamorised internationally, black mass resistance to the South African system reflected very closely the harsh conditions of life in townships and Bantustans, brutalized, violent and anti-social. The defenders of indirect rule, even though they were in part decent people with a cohesive outlook, were beaten back in extremely violent ways. In the section of his book dealing with the transition years, Mamdani has presented us with a picture of reactionary violence set into motion by a weakening security state as it looked in the early 1990s, a picture which in and of itself was a very valuable research exercise. But there was never much chance for this to derail the thrust towards creating a world of “citizens” in South Africa.

With difficulty, the initiative of the youths has been tamed and driven from visibility in rural South Africa since 1994 and normality with strong affinities to the past tentatively restored. The ANC has certainly compromised with rural social power structures, some of which directly influenced the party while others operate as part of the legal opposition. In a recent election time speech, outgoing President Nelson Mandela pointed out that “democracy had brought a better life for traditional leaders ... and acknowledged the role they can play in building a nation.” He viewed electoral democracy and “traditional authority” as two political traditions to be “married” in the context of the installation ceremony of a conservative chief in the Transkei. (*Business Day*, 19 April 1999) However, even this was described vaguely as being “something relevant: particularly in the rural areas.” Nationally, the Inkatha Freedom Party

of Mangosuthu Buthelezi, which represents the main voice of this older world typically confined to one large ethnic entity, that of the Zulus, is part of the Government of National Unity. But these voices are unlikely indeed to be the directive ones in the new South Africa. If the ANC falters or becomes ineffective, it is more likely urban demagogues than rural patriarchs who will challenge the ruling party — Winnie Mandela rather than Mangosuthu Buthelezi. The big threat to democracy today comes far more from the threats posed by a deracinated, more or less urbanised, world in which neither subjectship or citizenship is accessible to the population rather than what remains of “the structures of indirect rule” in South Africa. (32)

In summary, the difference between Mamdani and myself is probably twofold. On the one hand, I think there is too quick a leap between his strong characterisation of the colonial period and the complexities of the present. On the other, I place analytically a greater emphasis on political economy rather than authority and the state. I would stress not only political and social layers which have sedimented since 1960 but also on the dissolving power of capitalism — weak in Africa generally as Anne Phillips has perhaps pointed out most effectively for the high colonial period — but strongest in South Africa. Phillips emphasises that the preservation of indirect forms of control and older social and economic structures in West Africa was essentially a mark of defeat and disillusion with a capitalist project on the part of colonial ideologues and administrators. The more gradually dissolving effects of capitalism elsewhere in Africa also need consideration, difficult as they may be to pin down to a particular time sequence. If Phillips is correct in pointing to colonialism’s failure in erecting cornerstones for the systematic erection of a capitalist system, the role of the cash nexus in all its ramifications as a solvent cannot be underestimated if one takes the long view. The older Africa of coherent peasant households and structured hierarchies that suited colonial rulers is in growing disarray. In another generation, the majority of Africans may actually be city dwellers.

Only in cases where “traditional” forms enshrined by colonialism have been unusually successful in surviving, such as that of Swaziland, do I think that the key to African democracy might lie in a direct assault on “decentralised despotism.” Even here, it is hard these days to forget that the unfolding problematic of Rwanda contained an important stage, consonant with the granting of independence, which involved a successful Hutu revolt from “feudalism,” the local form of decentralised despotism, as preserved and protected by Belgian colonialism. Its resolution, by creating a potent refugee problem and resting the legitimacy of the new Rwandese state on the extirpation of the older order of things locally, bred a new and fatal dilemma for the future. The example of Rwanda makes me doubt that a break with feudalism or despotism alone takes us all the way. Finally, as Africa becomes more “hybrid,” to use a fashionable term, it is also less clear to me why what

Mamdani terms the commonality of Africa (31) need be so important today as an intellectual subject. On the contrary, integrating Africa and/or its constituent parts into world history and development seems a more important project than ever. We need to beware African exceptionalism! I suspect, however, that Mamdani and I would largely agree on what is now needed — a democracy that is tied in to expanding opportunities for security, development and accumulation through the broad population whose rights cease to be arbitrary, key emphasis on the transformation of the African countryside and the democratisation of local government but in conjuncture with the creation of an effective and consistent national state system. “In the absence of a wider strategy of political change and social transformation, the empowerment of local communities can be of only limited and temporary significance.” (217)

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Radical Writing on Painted Walls

Anthony W. Lee, *Painting on the Left. Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

When it comes to modern art of the Americas, perhaps no single artist has been such a constant point of reference and praise for liberal and leftist scholars than Diego Rivera. From such moderate assessments as those of Dawn Ades and Laurence Hurlburt to the explicitly leftist positions of David Craven and Alicia Azuela, art historians have viewed Rivera's monumental murals, their patronage, and their reception as touchstones for assessing the critical potential of art to participate in the major political struggles that occurred between the world wars. Such a tradition extends back to the heated and impassioned belief of contemporary writers in the twenties and thirties who saw cultural policy as part and parcel of left-wing political practice, however ambivalently such a position was embraced by the Communist Party and other factions of the left. (Trotsky's celebratory assessment of Rivera comes to mind as a prominent example.) Certainly there are other examples of critical artists before Rivera; but the complexity and contradiction of Rivera's work (not to mention the uproar that seemed to surround every mural he produced for capitalist patrons in the United States) continues to draw more attention to this artist than to others as a means of exemplifying how art can actually function within a broader radical political process. If there ever was an iconic leftist art production, then Rivera is your man to explore its potential and its limitations.

Or so it would seem. But Anthony Lee, in his new volume on public