

Africas in the World

by Ayrton Aubry

At a time when simplistic representations of Africa's role in international relations are being perpetuated, Sonia Le Gouriellec's book provides a review of the main studies on the place of the continent in the global arena from past to present.

About: Sonia Le Gouriellec, *Géopolitique de l'Afrique, Que sais-je?* Presses Universitaires de France, 2022, 128 p., 10 €.

Sonia Le Gouriellec's ground-breaking book *Géopolitique de l'Afrique* (Geopolitics of Africa) offers a rare French-language review of scientific perspectives on the African continent, and in particular on its relations with the rest of the world. The author, a lecturer in political science at the Institut Catholique de Lille and a specialist in international relations and the Horn of Africa, reexamines the place of the continent in world history. Her work shows that Africa has always been an integral part of the world-system, despite being often overlooked in global historical narratives, especially since the eighteenth century.

Le Gouriellec cleverly builds on the work of Achille Mbembe¹ and Valentin Mudimbé,² two authors who have highlighted the need to do away with the "inventions of Africa" of the last three centuries and the importance of reassessing

¹ Joseph-Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001.

² Valentin-Yves Mudimbé, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988.

both Africa's participation in the modern world and African forms of modernity. In doing so, she makes clear that she is moving away from the literature that points to Africa's absence (or, at the very least, passivity) in the international system or treats the continent as a homogeneous whole. Instead, she highlights the continent's integration into the world-system so as to better "think Africa itself." Concerned above all with narratives of this integration, the book proceeds as follows: First, it describes the different forms of African agency in and out of Africa (including during periods like the Cold War); second, it reviews African discourses on Africa (as reflected by the two opening quotations and the references inserted throughout the book).

A Necessary Historical Approach

The first chapter reviews the long history of the continent's relations with the rest of the world, which is of interest for a number of reasons. First, the review sheds light on historical figures already familiar to Africanists but less well known to non-specialists of Africa (for instance, nineteenth-century Sahelian jihadists like Samori Turé, Usmane dan Fodio, or Al Hajj Umar). Second, it reveals the genesis of certain contemporary issues—such as the materiality of borders in West Africa, on which point Le Gourellec provides a brief summary of the latest works by specialists, including Michel Foucher and Camille Lefebvre.³ Finally, it makes clear that African actors have never been passive in their relations with the rest of the world, even during episodes presented as responsible for their subjugation (for instance, the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885). Le Gourellec's references to historians of Africa are crucial in this regard. They also highlight the importance of multidisciplinary in African research, especially in a context where the historical study of Africa has been experiencing a revival in recent years—with the first part of the book providing an illustration of the uses that political scientists can make of this work.

³ Michel Foucher, *Frontières d'Afrique, pour en finir avec un mythe*, Paris, CNRS éditions, 2020; Camille Lefebvre, *Frontières de sable, frontières de papier: histoire de territoires et de frontières, du jihad de Sokoto à la colonisation française du Niger, XIXe-XXe siècles*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015.

A Combination of Classic and Recent Works on Africa

Le Gouriellec's book provides a concise bibliography of the topic at hand, which is a remarkable feat given the wide range of issues covered. This is especially appreciated since the bibliography manages to combine classic and recent works on Africa despite the limited number of references.

However, while a number of African authors are mentioned in the book, there is an unfortunate imbalance in favor of Western authors: The former are frequently quoted to support general statements (particularly the opening and concluding statements), whereas the latter are mobilized far more often in the argument (mention is made of Sindjoun and Ndlovu-Gatsheni, but authors such as Siba Grovogui or Ali Mazrui, who have interesting things to say about security and the African Union, are missing from the list). In this respect, the book reflects the dominant structure of academic production on African issues—though it could hardly have done otherwise given the nature of the enterprise.

The book's references nevertheless do reflect the fact that English-language African studies are being integrated into French-language political science, which is good news since these studies are very dynamic and already incorporate the reflections of African authors.

The chapter on Pan-Africanism situates the birth of the movement in the United States (as is generally accepted today). The author cites Amzat Boukari-Yabara's seminal work, *Africa Unite!*, and carefully reviews current discussions on the orientation taken by Pan-Africanism in the United States in the early twentieth century. However, Hakim Adi's useful and accessible overview, *Pan-Africanism: A History*,⁴ is too recent to appear in the bibliography.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide the keys to understanding the debates surrounding the development and current structure of African states, while also addressing particular cases such as Ethiopia and Djibouti—[in which Le Gouriellec is a specialist](#).

⁴ Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism: A History*, London, Bloomsbury, 2018.

On the Universality of African Issues

Some specialists may deplore the fact that certain points are not sufficiently clarified or that the precision and nuance of their field are absent from the analysis. Personally, I would argue that the text box on the International Criminal Court (ICC) (pp. 73-75) could have mentioned that [Senegal was the first country to ratify the Rome Statute](#). Dominant narratives do sometimes reassert themselves in the text. For instance, Chapter 3 is structured in such a way as to leave little room for African agency during the Cold War, and this agency is discussed only at the end, giving the impression that the author addresses “first the West, then the Rest.” However, this criticism needs to be qualified for two reasons. First, the Cold War was a product of the East-West conflict, and was therefore not driven simply by Western interests. Second, Le Gouriellec does make the effort to provide a periodization of the Cold War from the perspective of the African continent and not merely that of the great powers. The interests of the latter are now framed by events in Africa, including those of 1950-1956 (the anticolonial struggles in Kenya, Cameroon, and Congo, which took place without the support of the great powers) and 1956-1965 (the major conflict over Zaire).

Le Gouriellec’s work provides more or less direct lessons on the universality of African issues and on what it implies for the study of the continent in the social sciences. The book invites us to reflect on the nature of the questions we ask about Africa and on our definition of what constitutes African issues of academic interest. What questions can be asked “from an African point of view,” which is to say, not from an outside perspective? Le Gouriellec does not directly address this aspect of the study of Africa (nor is it the object of her work). However, each chapter of the book does ask whether African international relations are international relations like any other. Answering this question is a challenging task that requires positioning oneself between, on the one hand, generalizations that risk reducing Africa to a homogeneous unit, and, on the other, specificities that preclude any attempt at generalization.

Africa in the Plural

To overcome this difficulty, Le Gouriellec frequently conjugates Africa in the plural (“Africas”), particularly when she discusses the continent’s relations with the rest of the world (“Africas and Europe”; “Africas and the United States”; “Africas and

‘emerging powers’”). This enables her to develop an argument that is both clear and nuanced—so much so that one wonders (as is inevitable when writing a book review) why the editor did not choose a title highlighting these pluralities (“The Geopolitics of Africas,” for example).

African plurality is also judiciously expressed in the footnotes, which are limited in number yet provide valuable information on the different schools of thought in African studies. This is especially the case in Chapter 2, which is devoted to state formation in Africa, but also, perhaps less obviously, in other passages—for instance, the passages dealing with Pan-Africanism, which cite Boukari-Yabara and then Laurent Duarte of the association *Survie*, both of whom are very vocal in their criticism of France’s relations with certain African states.

Decentering and Transforming the Western Gaze on Africas

Le Gouriellec’s book is a welcome contribution at a time when there is a dearth of French-language political science publications on African international relations, and when revisionist histories of Africa and laudatory, exotic-sounding dictionaries of the continent are proliferating. Le Gouriellec allows readers to gain perspective on the important issues facing the African continent today; this is particularly the case with issues of security, with the book providing little-known, factual data on African wars and coups d’état, on the impact and geographical distribution of external interventions on the continent, and on African migrations and economies. The author thus offers rigorous and solid information that can help readers navigate current global issues.

More specifically, Le Gouriellec’s book renews our understanding of Africa in at least two manners. First, it broadens the continent’s frontiers by providing both an account of the birth of Pan-Africanism in the United States and a chapter on African diasporas. Second, it breaks with the analytical framework of the state by placing the focus on regions and—again—on diasporas. These lenses allow for a reading of the continent that is very different from those focusing on failed states or on national elites’

confiscation of resources—such readings being more common in works on neopatrimonialism.⁵

In the end, the book focuses little on “geopolitics”, on the modalities of African integration into the world-system, or more generally on themes dear to international relations scholars. *Géopolitique de l’Afrique* is indeed intended as an overview in dialogue with political science regarding contemporary African issues. Le Gouriellec nevertheless offers an enlightening starting point that can be completed with the rich references cited in the book.

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⁵ For a critique of these works, see Zubairu Wai, “Neo-patrimonialism and the discourse of state failure in Africa,” *Review of African Political Economy* 39/131, 2012: 27-43.