

BOOK REVIEW

Martin Welz. *Africa since Decolonization: The History and Politics of a Diverse Continent*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. ix + 375 pp. Maps. Notes. Index. \$25.99. Paper. ISBN: 9781108465564.

To write a history of the African continent, regardless of the period being covered, is an ambitious project. Anyone who has taught an African history survey knows the difficulty of doing justice to the diversity and complexity of these histories, while at the same time presenting the material in a fashion that may be easily understood. *Africa since Decolonization: The History and Politics of a Diverse Continent* by Martin Welz is therefore admirable for providing an accessible yet wide-ranging account for non-specialists. It is in many ways an excellent introduction to recent African history for those interested in the continent, as well as a handy companion for those with more experience wanting to brush up on the details. The book is organized in thematic chapters, and the key emphasis is on the diversity of the continent. As explained in the prologue, the first six chapters provide the “big picture” of Africa’s role in global history, as well as an overview of its contemporary politics and economics. The second half of the book delves deeper into African politics and the continent’s role in global politics. The first half, then, largely serves as context for the latter six chapters (8). The chapter outlines immediately highlight the heavy emphasis on politics and political economy.

This focus makes one wonder about the book’s subtitle. Are history and politics here considered separately? Is it meant as a political history? Discussions of history and contemporary political economy often feel disconnected, and the more historical first half of the book reads like context. The book’s key weakness is, then, that the attention to politics and political economy comes at the expense of such issues as social history, culture, religion, and gender and sexuality. The book is very strong on the former topics but decidedly light on the social and often on longer historical perspectives. One of the most telling examples of this is found on page 212, where the historical context Welz acknowledges is necessary to understand Boko Haram is a mere three sentences. Similarly, on page 53, he mentions that early postcolonial leaders had little interest in restructuring

the states they inherited, but he does not really discuss why. There is little discussion at this point of the social context, or class and other divisions within African societies, that could shed some light on this phenomenon. Later chapters do discuss political systems and actors in more detail, but without linking this explicitly to this earlier statement, readers are left to draw these links for themselves. This risks leaving them with a too-simple “bad leaders” discourse.

Chapters Six and Seven, on economic development and on states, political systems, and actors, respectively, are probably the strongest chapters. These topics seem to be where Welz is most comfortable. Even here, however, one can notice the relative weakness in discussing social and historical perspectives. The section on the informal economy discusses it mostly as a problem to be solved and does not extensively discuss its social and cultural aspects (131–34). Similarly, the discussion of traditional leaders is too disconnected from the rest of the chapter for the reader to fully appreciate their impact on politics and the state in many countries (169–71).

The book also lacks a thread or core argument beyond the diversity of the continent. Such a core argument is of course not always needed for a book with such a sweeping scope, yet Cooper’s development of the concept of the gatekeeper state in *Africa since 1940* (Cambridge, 2002) or the centrality of demography in Iliffe’s *Africans* (Cambridge, 1995) give these books a coherence that make them a more engaging read while allowing for the inclusion of a wide range of topics. Diversity as a thread does not quite manage to do this. *Africa since Decolonization*, then, comes across as repetitive at times and occasionally reads too much like a list of facts and details. One last critique is about the copy-editing. There are a surprising number of grammatical and word choice issues (e.g., the use of “nonimpunity” on pages 235 and 262), and a significant factual error (the casualties at Sharpeville). Also, the shading of the map on page 1 makes it difficult to read.

This book does many things well but may disappoint readers who are also interested in cultural or social history, gender and sexuality, religion, and other such topics. Maybe a subtitle along the lines of “A political and economic history of a diverse continent” would better reflect the volume’s content. Nevertheless, this book is impressive when it comes to politics and political economy, and Welz draws a wide range of subjects together without this being overwhelming or without losing the reader. For those primarily interested in these topics, it offers an excellent introduction to African history.

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