Arno Sonderegger (2008), *Die Dämonisierung Afrikas: Zum Despotiebegriff und zur Geschichte der Afrikanischen Despotie*, Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, ISBN 978-3-8364-9380-2, 655 pp.

The notion of despotism has been a feature of much of Western political thought since antiquity. It has been bound up both with strategies of cultural othering, above all of the "Orient", and with clarion calls to oppose illegitimate and arbitrary rule at home. In his Africanist Ph.D. thesis, defended in Vienna in 2005, Arno Sonderegger rehearses this tradition at length and explores the ways in which the notion of Oriental Despotism has been extended to also apply to the African continent. His main line of reasoning critiques the projection of the image of illegitimate and brutal rule, termed "despotism", onto the other, mainly the Orient, within the Western tradition of political thought. For this undertaking, the author has perused important sections of the Western tradition since Plato and a great amount of nineteenth-century literature – including philosophical works, travelogues, missionary and military campaign reports, and the endeavours of the fledgling area studies and social sciences of the day. The book is rounded off by a discussion of the references to "African Despotism" made during the twentieth century. Here, the literature reviewed ranges from works by German Africanists to social and cultural anthropologists right up to Bernard Shaw. Sonderegger also targets one of the main authors on Oriental Despotism, Karl August Wittfogel, along with his acolyte with regard to Africa, George Peter Murdock.

Unsurprisingly, the author comes up with a plethora of derogatory statements made about African societies and cultures, of wholesale judgements and indictments that all attest to the strong tendency in Western writing of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to discriminate against both Africans and features deemed to be African, and thereby to legitimize colonialism. However, it is a bit startling to discover that Sonderegger sums up by stating that evolutionism is "in need of critical revision" (607). As Horatio responds to Hamlet, "There needs no ghost come from the grave to tell us this." In addition, we are admonished that "above all concepts such as *anarchy* and above all the notion of *despoty* must be avoided" based on their moralistic baggage and conceptual emptiness (607). Sonderegger's store of objectionable pronouncements is further increased when he does not limit his gaze purely to the terms "despoty" or "despotism" but takes in the entire vision of "Africa" that some of his authors chose to convey. This certainly may seem to broaden the database, but it also points to a basic problem: While reiterating time and again that the notion of "despoty" or "despotism" is an "empty concept" (409), he holds fast to the idea of hunting down

this "concept" through the ages and across the huge literary span that he has ploughed through. Unfortunately, and in spite of repeated references to epistemology, Sonderegger seems not to have paused to think about the difference that exists between a mere term or notion and a concept which in scholarly usage is expected to be well defined and, possibly, elaborated. No doubt, in much or most of the literature that he mobilizes, the term "despoty" is ill defined or merely a cuss word – in contradistinction to "anarchy", which Sonderegger treats only in passing throughout the book only to throw it in with "despoty" for good measure at the end. I believe that it makes sense – and also that it is possible – to define "despoty" in a meaningful way, yet in one that also avoids – and even counters – any Orientalist implications (see my *Despotie in der Moderne*, 1993). Yet, such a perspective would relegate most of the instances Sonderegger has assembled to the status of, at best, preconceptual writing and thus render much of his undertaking rather futile.

As it stands, we are treated to an exhausting array of statements by a host of luminaries of Western philosophy, as well as to theories of the state. Most of the authors and concepts are dismissed with the liberal use of such tropes as "naturally nonsense" or "insanity" when they employ the incriminated term, or when they refer to their perceptions of Africa or the Orient. In working one's way through these pages, one is reminded time and again of the reason Niklas Luhmann once gave as to why one might usefully engage the classics – not because they gave answers that remain valid today, but because they asked questions that are still relevant. Sonderegger seems to perceive the value of dealing with the classics only to lie in amassing any and all incriminating tropes that he can find in their texts. However, he does not tell us why it is important, for instance, to recite (once again) Immanuel Kant's rather desultory references to Africa and Africans if this cannot be linked – and indeed there is no trace of an attempt to do so – to Kant's ideas on human rights or world peace, let alone to his *Critique of Pure Reason*. If, in Max Weber's view, scholarship is about boring thick logs, Sonderegger is attacking cardboard here.

It should also be noted that Montesquieu, one of Sonderegger's main culprits, directed his ire primarily not against the Orient, but rather against the French monarchy of his day. Further, anyone interested in Montesquieu's views on the Orient should be alerted to his *Lettres Persanes* for his approach of precisely referring to mirror images and refractions in this critical exercise. Such ambiguity has eluded Sonderegger completely.

His discussion of Africa-related literature follows the same lines. In the end, he limits himself to accounts about Asante and Dahomey, where he has assembled an impressive list of publications for the period from 1788 to

1906. For these, he also provides quantitative data that in itself is revealing of his concern and methodology. Simply by computing percentages by ten-year periods for publications in which the term "despotism" is employed, he provides bar diagrams (258, 309, 399) that, while showing certain vacillations in usage, also leave open two basic questions: (1) Which notion did the term actually mean to convey in each case? (2) How can one seriously compare 37.5 per cent of 8 to 84.6 per cent of 13, or 30.7 per cent of 26, without weighting the percentages (309)? Arguably, more serious are the conceptual issues in Sonderegger's account of Asante and Dahomey during the time in question and in the reports about these kingdoms. He certainly is able to show that judgements by representatives of the powers that kept stations on the "Gold Coast" and the "Slave Coast" during the time period studied – and also by missionaries – tended to denounce conditions in the African states more harshly when confrontation became acute and colonial occupation eventually loomed, while in earlier decades accounts were arguably more balanced. A central issue, however, that Sonderegger does not address in any strict sense is African agency. In the region and at the time in question, this concerned above all the slave trade, and authors such as Eric Wolf, who is quoted, have set high standards for such treatment. These include addressing the backlash of the systematic involvement in an undertaking such as human trafficking for the institutional structure and, indeed, culture of any society and state. Sonderegger limits himself instead to lashing out against indictments of human sacrifice and cannibalism as discriminatory, along with demanding that we understand African societies on their own terms. It is hard to object to that as far as it goes, but one wishes that the author had used some of his nearly 700 pages to at least give us an idea about what exactly this might mean. Instead, references to "the object of investigation as such" (542) or "reality as such" (597 n. 1746) or even "the actual complexity of reality" (602) that he wants to see conveyed raise serious doubts about his concept of what scholarship can do. His pervasive mixing up of "seeming" and "apparent" (the latter term is obviously missing from his vocabulary, but my conjecture would be that most times this is what he actually means to say) underscores the impression that the author is seriously epistemologically confused.

For the profuse references to various twentieth-century writings, including those of Shaw, Sonderegger has omitted completely Mahmood Mamdani's work on the bifurcation of the African state, which systematically posits despotism as a consequence much less of African polities than of indirect rule and thus colonialism, and which furthermore sees an antagonism between such despotism and the rights of citizens. This would have meant shifting from lashing out at authors whose work is taken up quite

selectively (classics) – or who had few academic pretensions (travellers and missionaries) or little concern with social and political issues (linguists, some old-style ethnologists) or who have been critiqued over and over again and are fairly easy prey (Wittfogel and company) – towards seriously engaging with conceptualizations of African polities. Sonderegger has taken up one quite recent author in his closing section; his treatment of Peter Skalnik's work, however, revolves around Skalnik's terminology and evolutionist leanings instead of more pertinently addressing his highly problematic concept of supposedly autochthonous African political structures. Once again, the same point can and should be made: Language and terminology policing is not an adequate substitute for serious engagement with the thought of others.

Unfortunately, the book also falls short in that it falls into line with much of the current academic writing style in German with respect to presentation. Briefly, Sonderegger's style is frequently clumsy and veers from the rather highbrow to the colloquial; there are numerous grammar and idiomatic lapses and also quite a number of faults in source translations, for which originals are sometimes provided.

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