

REITH LECTURES 1961: The Colonial Reckoning

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Lecture 6: Prospects for the Future

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In this last talk I leave the past and present and try to assess the future. Gibbon wrote that after Ethiopia made its contact with the Roman Empire and with Christianity, it went to sleep for a thousand years. Much of tropical Africa lay in this sleep of isolation for all the thousands of history's years until its rough awakening some sixty years ago.

But it is unlikely that it will be allowed to go to sleep again. The new African states leap straight from nonentity to importance. This is because there is an apparently equal weight of power within the opposing Western and Communist groups. The nature of modern war makes it almost impossible to wage it. So they are forced to play a giant game of poker, in which the cards are threats, alliances, bases, influence, and votes in the United Nations. This is the situation which gives the third world its chance. It holds a balancing position out of all proportion to its real strength.

It is mostly made up of the ex-colonial states, and may be reckoned at more than half of the hundred or more nations at the United Nations. It contains twenty-five African states, eighteen of which became independent little more than twelve months ago. Eleven of these states have fewer than 3,000,000 inhabitants, some of them have only 1,000,000 or less—but the vote of each counts as much in the Assembly as the vote of the United States or of Russia or Britain. Here is a fantastic discrepancy between legal status and real power! How much does it matter? Is there perhaps even some advantage in having a kind of detached, neutral jury who cast their votes according to their three main, and on the whole beneficent, objectives—to liquidate the remains of colonialism, to attract financial aid, and to ban war, especially atomic war?

But the young African states are already losing their childhood's innocence and learning that they are no more immune than the wicked old nations from the evils of frontier disputes, irredentism, and even ideological differences.

The divisions between the new states are in part the legacy left by the colonial powers. West Africa, especially, was shared out by France and Britain in a most haphazard way, and the cultural differences between our two countries are now strangely mirrored on the broken surface of Africa. France consciously took up the torch of Rome. Her faith was in universal human reason and in unity through government, law, and culture. She tried to hold all her colonies within the embrace of a greater France. But African nationalism was strong enough to demand her sudden and complete surrender to the same independence and fragmentation that were the end-products of Britain's very different policy. But for France, and for her colonies, the past may prove to be not all lost. For, again like Rome, France called her provincials to the councils in her capital, and a number of the new African leaders

gained rich political experience in many years of equal association with Frenchmen in Paris, an advantage which no leaders in ex-British Africa can match.

But in the former British Colonies there are many more Africans with experience of handling local affairs at different levels, from colonial legislatures down to tribal chiefs and councils. France, centralizing, equalitarian, had little respect for tribal hierarchy and native customs. I remember once going from Northern Nigeria, where one could hardly obtain an audience with the Emir in his spreading palace, into French territory, just across the border. Here I was sent to visit the local Emir, once the peer of his Nigerian neighbour. The interpreter sat outside sounding the horn of our car until the Emir came running obediently out of his crumbling quarters.

But there was another side. On the southern rim of the Sahara I met one of the veiled Touareg with his camels, and tried to learn his opinion of French administration. 'But, Madame!' he said, drawing himself up to the height of his slender, wiry frame, 'I am a French citizen'.

Here was France's old magic! This secret weapon of assimilation stands France in good stead today. Nearly all her West African states keep their social and economic links with her; and this even as she fights her Algerian rebels, who presented too hard an Islamic surface for her assimilative influence to pierce. Most of her former Negro provinces, now small independent states, are bound by need to accept her generous help in staff and economic privileges, and her outstanding assistance in finance. True, Guinea and Mali have struck their independent attitudes, yet all these states will probably retain a deep imprint of French influence. France gave the elite what they valued more than anything else in the world, what we so often failed to give them, the equality of respect.

The former subjects of France and Britain look out on the ex-Belgian Congo, a sight bitter to African hopes and pride, for it reveals not only Belgium's great miscalculation but what Africa can still be without adequate help from the outside world. Further south the prospect is easier for them to judge—at least so long as South Africa, in practice, and the Portuguese, in effect, maintain the unyielding supremacy of white over black. While these situations exist all colonialism, past and present, can be associated with their condemnation. Portugal claims that her policy is one of racial equality and that she gives freely of her blood in race mixture. She has indeed helped to breed a large new Christian nation with an incalculably great future in Brazil, and a small Christian nation in Goa, whose emigrants to East Africa have won the highest character. But in Angola and Mozambique she has done little to gain acquittal from the charge of colonialism in its severest form. The Africans there are too many, too solidly different, for her to endow them fully with her blood. The records of our Anti-Slavery Society would show the efforts over a long series of years to expose Portugal's way with her African labour, and there was a time when British governments and public men were active in protest. But the way from Portuguese province to African nation will be neither quick nor easy: The lesson of the Congo disaster is clear. Until the United Nations is able to offer strong, continuous, and constructive help to an African state, as it emerges unprepared, and perhaps rebelliously, out of colonial rule, the alternative to colonialism may well be anarchy.

What of South Africa? Here is what may be the last beleaguered stronghold of white mastery in Africa. Its ruling garrison are Africans, white Africans, who will defend their position to the last, for they are in fact a little nation which has built itself over three centuries into this position and has nowhere else to go. They have their backs to the wall but they dare not turn to read the writing upon it. Their state rests upon the foundation of absolute power over the black population. This is maintained by a network of legal discrimination which binds 10,000,000 people so tightly that not one, not the most educated or able, can escape to freedom or equality—unless indeed he manages to escape the country. The heroes of the stronghold are those who, while committed to the country, yet maintain the struggle for justice for the black Africans. Yet South Africa is not quite all it seems to the outside world, especially perhaps to its outside African critics. Certainly the laws cut harshly into the sensitivities of human nature and the bonds of family life. Yet many of the Africans there have a level of wages, housing, schooling, medical care and other amenities far higher than that of the great majority of Africans to the north. On my last visit to the native locations of Johannesburg I could burn with indignation to see the bulldozers destroying the cherished African freehold location of Sophiatown. But, nearby, I could remark in the new location the improved, if dreary, housing, and the undeniably healthy look of the children and especially the hundreds of little girls playing in their neat gym tunics.

The Richest Economy in Africa

Some of the tribes have now lived in South Africa for three centuries within a European-conducted state, built in, as it were, if only at the bottom, to the richest and most highly developed economy in Africa. As long as they have any hope they will want to infiltrate upwards within the citadel, and they may therefore not be wholly responsive to the cries of those outside whose impatient voices seem to call upon them to blow it up. True, the system is a defiance of all accepted economic laws—but, economic laws have a way of ultimately asserting themselves. If the Africans did succeed one day in taking over the South African state unharmed, they might form the richest nation in Africa. Disciplined by adversity, with their own culture deeply imprinted by Western civilization, they might stand at some point between the Negroes of Africa and those of the New World, who, like them, are the products of different kinds of slavery and subjection.

As Britain and France step back on to the side-lines, the United States steps forward to join them there. This new presence, let us confess it, was not at first easy for Britain to accept. It seemed sometimes as if Americans were saying to the Africans, even while Britain was engaged in the final delicate transfer of power, ‘We understand the meaning of freedom. We wrested it ourselves from these same colonialists, and once we have cleared away the last relics of British control, we can get down to the real business of helping you’. Some individual Americans did give this impression. But they did injustice to their nation as a whole.

America, like other nations, includes brash young nationalists, and hard-faced business men. But she has been ready to put her great wealth into the service of the world as no other nation has ever done. She has bred specialists, indeed statesmen, in philanthropy, who have so committed themselves to this complex, world-wide business of international aid that they have almost forgotten any special American interest. America’s concern with Africa came late but, characteristically, she has been

quick off the mark. A very few years ago the evidences of American concern with Africa could have been listed in a brief pamphlet; today a fat volume would be needed. Americans are in a hurry— so are Africans. So ought we to be. Moreover, America's unavoidable ignorance is being repaired—also at America's pace! I have had to do with a stream of her young graduates. They take post-graduate degrees in Oxford en route for Africa, and I am deeply impressed by their intelligence and enthusiasm. Major studies are now coming from the new African departments in American universities. With her great resources, her idealism and belief in freedom, America is certain to take a great, perhaps the greatest, part in giving to Africa the help which Africa needs.

Over against America stand Russia and her satellite powers. The achievement of independence lays Africa's new states wide open not only to the influence, but now to the activities, of the communist states. The colonial powers used their authority to put up barriers against this influence. The inevitable response of the awakening African nationalists was 'If you are so much against communism, there clearly must be something in it for us'. And they found something: the practical example of Russia's rapid advance, in her industry, her agriculture, and her education. They were struck, too, by the absolute racial equality which Russia preaches and is believed to practise in her vast empire.

Education from the Communists

The communists have two holds over the young African states. One concerns economic aid, and of this I will speak in a moment. The other is education. Africans' thirst for education is such that they would accept it from the devil himself. So an ever-increasing stream of students flows into Russia. A Peoples' Friendship University has been built up in Moscow. And, to counter Russia's own ignorance, serious research work upon African sociology and history is now being developed at Moscow and Leningrad universities—and need I add that African history is being re-written? Meanwhile Russia and the satellite states direct upon Africans, and especially young Africans and trade unionists, a spreading complex of agencies.

What are their chances of success? So far it is estimated that out of the world's 40,000,000 communists only about 50,000 are in Africa, and these mostly in the extreme north and south. Communists, indeed, are somewhat baffled by their failure to find in Africa—at least outside South Africa—the necessary stage-setting within which to play out the implacable drama of their revolution. Where are those dispossessed, land-hungry peasantry? Too few—too localized. The urban proletariat? Too few, again, too embryonic. The bourgeoisie, ripe for liquidation? Too few in most parts, too essential in others. Some revolutions, yes, but mostly such peaceful revolutions! With many of the expected Marxist necessities absent, some very improper elements are strongly present, racialism, nationalism, tribalism and, surely, not a little personality-cult? Among pagan, Christian, and Muslim, a deep belief in another world which makes them very allergic to any anti-God campaign. And remember that Islam can be shown on a map of religions coming down over the great shoulders of Africa like a cape. Perhaps communism's strongest obstacle is something I have emphasized in all these talks, the passion of Africans to escape from all subjection. They are therefore determined not to get rid of the domination of one set of white men only to fall under that of another.

The communist theorists are troubled by all this, but not dismayed. They can wait. They believe that in time the developments which their theory demands will, must come, about and then what they call scientific socialism will swallow up all these regrettable errors.

The Darker Side of Russian Influence

Does it seem strange to us that Africans should appear to be so open to influence from a state which has never allowed one of its own many dependencies to escape its power; which has bloodily repressed any 'nationalist' stirrings; has deported whole peoples, and in some places planted new lands with Russian settlers? It should not seem strange. The Africans are still held in the emotions of their revolt against the power and influence of the West. It is from that standpoint that they look out upon the world. For them the light falls on Russia's challenge to the West, Russia's offers of help; her real achievements, her purposeful energy. The darker sides both of theory and practice still lie in the shadow.

China stands beside Russia here. She, too, is stepping up every sort of activity in Africa. She has some advantages over Russia. She suffered herself at the hands of the imperialists. And she has carried out an amazingly thorough communist revolution through her peasantry. Moreover, her people can be regarded as coloured—at least they are not white.

There is also the matter of economic aid. The subject is a jungle of facts and figures, of changing theories and difficult practices. I must skirt round it. One thing is clear. Africa is going to make an immense demand on the rest of the world. A dangerous discrepancy yawns between Africans' hopes and their capacity to achieve them. The Western nations built up their own wealth and their skills, the two are really indivisible, over many years during which governments, under capitalist influence, were able to impose under-consumption on the masses. The sudden wholesale enfranchisement of the poor and inexperienced masses in Africa makes that discipline impossible there—even if we did wish to see it repeated. What then? The capital must be supplied from outside. But Africa no longer offers the security which enabled colonial governments to obtain a flow of capital. Will the Western Powers therefore make adequate financial sacrifices for political ends?

It is on this economic side that the communist states have their greatest opportunity. They control all their own economic forces and can deploy them when and where they will. The new African leaders rule people of immense poverty and immense expectations. Their population diagram will show its mounting line while, unless the Western Powers can stabilize it, their agricultural price index will zig-zag dangerously. Popular disappointment, tribal, disunity, and other difficulties may tempt African governments to increasingly dictatorial methods. If so, communist tutors will be ready to show them their techniques of control. More likely, the communists will direct against the old leaders the impatient young men as these return a few years hence from their Marxist academies.

Mr. George Kennan has warned us that we have to learn to live in the same world as the communist states and that we should not exaggerate our dangers from them. We

liberal British long to heed this warning because we hate to feel obliged to hate. So we must hope that no consortium of communist states will pass the Africans through their iron mill and turn them out docile, unified, literate, reasonably productive, but with their minds sealed against the West. We may hope that Africa may obtain donations of steel mills from Russia and learn rice-growing from the Chinese, without having to pay the full political price: that the difficulty of helping Africa may teach moderation even to communists, or that inter—communist rifts may weaken their offensive. But we cannot sit back and hope that these things will happen and that Africa will retain our gradualist and liberal traditions, or return to them. The struggle being waged in Europe and Asia and South America is only now being extended to this fourth continent. Disunity, poverty and inexperience make Negro Africa a very soft region. And in South Africa it exposes a tempting Achilles' heel.

On our side we shall not find the African states easy to help. They ask, indeed demand, financial aid from their rich but hesitant suitors whilst determined in no way to compromise their political chastity in return. The aid they accept must not even bear the moral taint of philanthropy.

The wheel has indeed come full circle. The Western world must pay to the uttermost for its period of world domination and colonial power. In Africa, as I have tried to show, the reason for this heavy cost lies deep in the sudden release of its people from their long isolation and poverty. This brings me back, after wandering far, to the question in my first talk. What are likely to be Britain's own relations with our former subjects? There is much we still share; the Queen, if not the Crown, the English language, the great gift of our law and procedure, the ideal, at least, of our democracy. There is the link between our own universities and the nine which some of our senior academics have so tirelessly fostered these last few years in Africa. These bonds could weaken but there are new ones we could still create. Much will depend upon our dealings here with many thousand African students and, on the other side, upon the readiness of our young doctors, lawyers, scientists, above all teachers of every kind, to go out for at least two or three years to serve the great needs of Africa, and serve in the spirit which Africa now demands. This in turn requires that those who hold authority in this country should facilitate such ventures, perhaps by secondment, and make them a qualification in a career and not the reverse.

The statistics of empire do not record the uncovenanted mercies which have accompanied it. But I cannot leave them out of this colonial reckoning. The official bridge has made possible uncounted and rewarding contacts between individuals and groups from each side. Think of that immense army of missionaries which went out, often before any government or security. There are at this moment some 20,000 from all the churches serving quietly in Africa. They face, at the deepest level, the struggle in the soul of Africans between their new faith and their self-assertion against what seems, however wrongly, to be the white man's religion.

Behind Britain today lies wealth, power, and empire. Before her still wealth, perhaps, but also a difficult choice of directions. Whichever we choose we must try to keep, indeed to increase, our great knowledge of the peoples of the former empire and the measure of goodwill and understanding we share with them. This goodwill may even, in time, outgrow anti-colonialism, as it has to a considerable extent in India. (I would indeed say here how grateful we should be for the historical understanding and even

appreciation we have had from many Indian thinkers and writers. For, after all, we too have our feelings, our hidden nationalism; we are not political eunuchs.) We cannot, I believe, use such assets of empire as remain to us in a vain attempt to rebuild some new kind of independent assertive or arbitral power in the world. Our greatest contribution would be to put all our strength and experience behind the international organs in which alone lie the possibility of peace, order, and mutual help. The younger generation is most likely to be able to make the adjustment from power to service. The young can also share with Africans their immense power of happiness, the joy and energy that has shown itself in the dance and the drum and has carried them through their poverty and enslavement. Policy for Africa is, of course, only one part of our whole external policy. And what we do abroad can be an extension only of what we are at home. Yet, equally, our Welfare State cannot succeed without a humane and alert adjustment to a rapidly changing world—and no part is changing more quickly than Africa.

In making my colonial reckoning I have thought of myself in the main as speaking to my own people. The time has not come to ask from Africans their recognition of our goodwill, still less their gratitude. Their present mood is to give up being grateful, or humble, or afraid, or ashamed, or even impressed. They have had so much of all that. They are determined to be something quite new, Africans! So when we talk to them about politics—and what a pity it is that we talk to them of so little else, they answer from the blood and not from the brain. This has been one of the main themes in these talks, and also the immense difficulties—not of their making—which confront them in their attempt to prove themselves. There is no certainty that they will succeed. The lamps of Africa may go out even before they are fully alight, as some of the lamps of Europe have gone out. Whether they do or not will depend very much upon the degree of understanding and help which we in the West give to Africa during the next two or three critical years.