

# H-Diplo ESSAY 204

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*My Circuitous Scholarly Journey*

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My route to becoming an academic, and more specifically, a historian of Africa, was a circuitous one. A child of the 1960s, I was raised in a family with a strong concern for social justice in the era of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. I joined my parents (a historian and a librarian) as they worked against racism, militarism, and poverty, and my friends who were tackling environmental destruction. Seeking a liberal arts college with a tradition of social justice activism, I found myself at Oberlin College, which had been a pioneer in the nineteenth-century anti-slavery and women's rights movements.

At Oberlin, I was influenced by the nineteenth-century German philosopher and social scientist, Karl Marx, who posited that the true goal of the philosophical endeavor was political action, claiming that “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”<sup>1</sup> I also found resonance with the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, who, in his classic work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, asserted that education is the foundation of human liberation. For a transformative pedagogy, Freire argued, theoretical learning is not sufficient. Intellectual lessons need to become part of lived experience through a process called “praxis”—that is, “the action and reflection of men [and women] upon their world in order to transform it.”<sup>2</sup> Three years after graduation, I worked at the Center of Concern, a Jesuit-founded social justice research organization, where I was influenced by a social analysis that linked faith to justice through the pastoral “circle of praxis.” This model was developed from the insights of Freire and the liberation theologians Gustavo Gutiérrez Merino and Juan Luis Segundo.<sup>3</sup>

It was in college that I took my first steps toward becoming a historian—although at the time I would have denied that this was my goal. Oberlin in the 1970s was virtually a school without rules. There were no distribution requirements. Students tended to sample many disciplines, and I did so in a delighted and unsystematic way. Enrolling in a smorgasbord of courses without clear pattern or aim, I finally majored in history because I could not choose between my interests. History seemed to allow me to have it all.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, trans. W. Lough (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), vol. 1, 13-15.

<sup>2</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Seabury, 1970), 66.

<sup>3</sup> See especially, Gustavo Gutiérrez Merino, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973), and Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1976).

When I graduated in 1977, I had not settled on a profession. Despite my father's example, I had no intention of attending graduate school or becoming an academic. Instead, I headed to Washington, D.C., where I thought I might try my hand in the museum world. Ironically, an internship at the Smithsonian took me in a different direction. Research for the museum introduced me to the Library of Congress, which led to an internship in the Foreign Affairs Division of the Congressional Research Service—and eventually to the progressive foreign policy think tank world. Quite unconsciously, I was reconnecting with my activist roots.

After a short stint at the Center for International Policy, where I conducted research on human rights and President Jimmy Carter's foreign policy, I was offered a position on the Africa Project of the Institute for Policy Studies, where I was tasked with exposing the role of U.S. corporations in supporting white minority-rule in South Africa. My first book, *Decoding Corporate Camouflage: U.S. Business Support for Apartheid*, argued that the voluntary employment code adopted by U.S. corporations to justify their presence in South Africa served as a cover for their strategic support of the apartheid economy.<sup>4</sup> Based on corporate compliance reports and secondary sources, the study was intended as a tool for the U.S. divestment movement, through which state and local legislatures, trade unions, and religious institutions agitated for U.S. economic withdrawal from South Africa. The book was banned in South Africa in 1981. Meanwhile, the Institute for Policy Studies had disbanded the Africa Project, and I had moved on to a stint at the Center of Concern, where I investigated the impact of U.S. government funding on religious organizations engaged in development work during the Cold War.<sup>5</sup>

By that time, it had become clear that while I had discovered my passion for Africa, I did not have what it took to keep a job. Without 'credentials'—that is, more than a B.A. in U.S. history—I would be lucky to get even short-term contract work. So, I backed into academia through the anti-apartheid movement. In 1981, I enrolled in a doctoral program in African history at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. As an activist, I had been attracted to historical works by E.J. Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson, which explored the lives of working people and the emergence of modern European social movements.<sup>6</sup> Under the influence of my doctoral advisor, Steven Feierman, I developed an interest in the new field of African social history, which examined the lives of ordinary people and captured the attention of a generation of historians.<sup>7</sup>

When I entered graduate school, my intent had been to conduct doctoral research in South Africa. However, events took another unexpected turn. The banning of my first book had been preceded by a three-month undercover trip to South Africa, sponsored by the Maryknoll Fathers, who had invited me to write about apartheid for their liberation theology–oriented mission magazine. In South Africa and after my return to the United States, I was harassed by the South African security police. I became persona non grata and was unable to return to that country until after apartheid fell. As a result, I conducted my doctoral research in Zimbabwe, which had become independent in 1980, following ninety years of white minority rule.

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Schmidt, *Decoding Corporate Camouflage: U.S. Business Support for Apartheid* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> Schmidt (primary author), Jane Blewett, and Peter Henriot, *Religious Private Voluntary Organizations and the Question of Government Funding* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> See especially, E.J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th centuries*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Praeger, 1963), and E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1964).

<sup>7</sup> Feierman's foundational works in this field include Steven Feierman, *The Shambaa Kingdom: A History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), and Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990). For an assessment of the impact of social history on African historiography, see Michael Adas, "Social History and the Revolution in African and Asian Historiography," *Journal of Social History* 19:2 (Winter 1985): 335-348.

Pursuing my interest in social history, I focused on the impact of Christian missionaries and colonial rule on rural women in Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia), using primary sources collected from missionary and government archives and oral interviews conducted with African women and men.<sup>8</sup> Highlighting the voices and experiences of ordinary Africans, my dissertation, later published in Heinemann's *Social History of Africa* series, approached contemporary Western sources with a critical eye, exploring absences as well as distortions and challenging common understandings of historical events.

After graduate school, my interest in the impact of colonial rule on ordinary people and their response to it took me to the former French territories of Guinea and Senegal in West Africa, where I used archival and oral sources to reconstruct the history of grassroots mobilization against French colonialism. This research resulted in two books that were both political and social histories. The first investigated the role of World War II veterans, trade unionists, farmers, women, teachers, and youth in Guinea's independence struggle.<sup>9</sup> The second, situated in the context of the Cold War, explored how Guinea's 1958 vote for independence was the culmination of a struggle between local militants and political leaders for control of the political agenda.<sup>10</sup>

Just as my research interests had meandered, so did my career choices. Through my work in the anti-apartheid movement, I inadvertently became a scholar—and an academic. Although I had gone to graduate school to become a more effective advocate for social justice, I still needed to make a living. Perhaps teaching—challenging young minds to think differently about the world—was a good option after all. After receiving my Ph.D. in 1987, I spent three decades teaching undergraduates at liberal arts institutions, first at Macalester College and then at Loyola University Maryland.

As a teacher, my central objective was to open students to new ways of seeing and thinking about the world. I developed reading and writing assignments that exposed them to different value systems and worldviews, sensitizing them to the humanity of “other” peoples and the validity of their cultures. My courses examined the encounters of Africa and the West, exploring how those encounters routinely denigrated African peoples and their cultures. They investigated how belief in Western cultural superiority, buttressed by ideological and religious justifications and military technologies, led to political, economic, and social domination of African peoples, first through the institution of slavery, then through conquest, colonization, and religious conversion. They showed how, in the contemporary world, the continued domination of Africa by industrialized nations is evident in the deeply rooted poverty and material underdevelopment that characterizes much of the continent today.

As a teacher, my primary challenge was how to inspire in my students the kind of passion that had drawn me into the anti-apartheid movement in the 1970s and '80s. In many ways the pedagogical obstacles of the earlier era were less daunting. The role of the United States in sustaining apartheid was clear-cut, and even cursory knowledge of the U.S. Civil Rights movement provided a basis for understanding the South African case. The feeling of responsibility was a powerful hook that galvanized student interest and drew them to African studies courses. By contrast, the relationship between external actors and the continent's predicaments in the 1990s and 2000s was less obvious; its exposure rarely evoked a sustained response. Most of my students had never been to Africa, known an African person, or even studied the continent. Scholarly writings, novels, and films helped them understand Africans' values, experiences, and worldviews. These sources, however, did little to evoke empathy. In 2005, I turned to Loyola's Center for Community Service and Justice for assistance.

Hoping to stimulate concern for social justice through community engagement, the Center promotes the adoption of experiential learning in academic courses. Service-learning—that is, experiential learning through community service—is

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<sup>8</sup> Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders, and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870-1939* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Schmidt, *Mobilizing the Masses: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Nationalist Movement in Guinea, 1939-1958* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Schmidt, *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea, 1946-1958* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

intended to complement academic content. Its goal is to enhance understanding through human relationships that are grounded in mutually beneficial partnerships. Having learned that Baltimore was an important resettlement venue for African refugees and asylees, I found a number of programs that focused on these groups. Loyola soon engaged two—Baltimore City Community College’s Refugee Youth Project and Soccer Without Borders (SWB)—as community partners. Both organizations sponsored tutoring programs for elementary, middle school, and high school youth, with sports as an additional component of the SWB program. Those of my students who opted for service-learning volunteered in the tutoring/sports programs one afternoon per week. After each session, they submitted written reflections about their experiences and observations and related their experiential knowledge to the course’s academic content. The students’ heightened interest in the academic material, respect for other religions and cultures, and concern for injustices suffered by others was palpable. Many conducted their own investigations into the sources of the injustices and the conditions that caused the outflow of refugees and asylees.

My most recent scholarly projects, inspired by my undergraduates, have taken me back to foreign policy and its implications for social justice. At the beginning of each semester, when I ask my students to brainstorm the word ‘Africa,’ most conjure up images of a continent riddled with war and corruption and imploding from disease and starvation. Like many outsiders, they tend to blame Africans for their plight. Faced with their deeply rooted beliefs and world views, I knew that there would be no paradigm shift without deeper historical understanding. Like my teaching, the objective of my newest scholarly work has been to undermine the common myths and misunderstandings that students bring to class.

To expose the role outsiders have played in provoking and sustaining Africa’s current predicaments, I wrote two books that focus on foreign political and military intervention in Africa. Both explore the motives for intervention, the rationales used to justify intervention, and the consequences of such action. Both use case studies from across the continent to illustrate their points. The first book examines the period of African decolonization and the Cold War (1945-1991).<sup>11</sup> The second explores the post-Cold War period (1990s–2017).<sup>12</sup> Like my earlier work in social history, these studies examine absences and distortions and challenge received wisdom. However, unlike the previous works, these exposés are not intended for experts. Based almost exclusively on secondary sources, they do not seek to advance new theories, present the results of recent primary research, or provide a detailed survey of current literature. Rather, their purpose is pedagogical. They target students, teachers, policymakers, humanitarian and human rights workers, and the media.

What has continued and what has changed during this intellectual journey? My central mission has remained constant: to promote greater understanding of contemporary Africa through historically informed writing. As before, my aim is to reach beyond the academy to the wider reading public, focusing its attention on the historical roots of current issues. What has shifted is the medium. As pricey academic books and journals rarely attract a large readership, I am moving toward shorter, open access articles online that are likely to influence a broader, more geographically diverse audience.

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<sup>11</sup> Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa: From the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). This book was the subject of a 2014 H-Diplo roundtable review, <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT15-22>.

<sup>12</sup> Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa after the Cold War: Sovereignty, Responsibility, and the War on Terror* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018). This book is the subject of a March 2020 H-Diplo roundtable review, <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT21-31>.