History of Africa through western eyes

From the dark continent to the emerging one, crude generalisations say more about the viewer than the viewed

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An 1826 map of Africa. Photograph: Michael Maslan/Corbis

The euro crisis, double-dip recessions, Occupy protests and Libor corruption scandals aside, it seems that capitalism is alive and well – at least in [Africa](https://www.theguardian.com/world/africa). Africa is '[Rising](https://www.economist.com/node/21541015)', westerners are often told these days, after decades of economic ruin, civil war and governmental mismanagement. Impressive economic growth [statistics](https://data.worldbank.org/region/SSA), the "burgeoning African middle [class](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-18094180)", mushrooming mobile phone and internet use – these things are all proudly [trumpeted](https://www.ft.com/cms/s/288cef92-50b3-11e1-8cdb-00144feabdc0,Authorised=false.html?_i_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2F0%2F288cef92-50b3-11e1-8cdb-00144feabdc0.html&_i_referer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.dambisamoyo.com%2Fbooks-and-publications%2Fpublicat), "remind[ing] the world of the capitalist way". But why all this 'good news' now?

The seemingly obvious answer is that things are indeed improving in Africa and the west's commentariat are now, quite simply, reporting what is happening. But to properly understand the Africa Rising narratives, we also need to look at what they are a response to – the much older, and much more negative, Dark Continent narratives that have dominated western discourses on Africa for centuries.

**The bad: the creation of a Dark Continent**

Tellingly, we can trace these negative narratives to the beginnings of Western Civilisation itself. In *Histories*, Herodotus (aka The Father of History) relates a cautionary tale about what happens in Africa. Five Nasamonians – "enterprising youths of the highest rank" – were off exploring southern Libya. After several days of wandering, they found some fruit trees and started helping themselves. Then, several "men of small stature", "all of them skilled in magic", seized and captured them, taking them for inscrutable and dastardly magic-dwarf purposes.

In this way, Herodotus suggested that Africa was not only different, but also more threatening, sinister and dangerous than Greece. Subsequent generations of European [writers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Mandeville) followed suit, substituting fantasy for fact in markedly antagonistic ways.

Europeans created an image of Africa that was the perverse opposite of Europe's – its mirror image. Europe's general [superiority](https://kirbyk.net/hod/image.of.africa.html) would, by comparison with and in contrast to this image, be self-evident. Europe's own idea of itself was thus predicated on its image of Africa (and other so-called backward regions).

From the 17th century onwards, debates over the slave trade, racism, and colonialism helped crystallise these negative narratives in western discourses. Abolitionists argued that Africa was a place of suffering because the slave trade provoked war, disease, famine and poverty; anti-Abolitionists said Africa was so forbidding as to make slavery in foreign countries a positive escape. Either way, Africa was full of "savagery" and constant war.

The growing discourse on race added a further dimension to these debates, supposedly explaining "African backwardness" and "savagery" as biologically-predetermined characteristics. Social Darwinists, such as Herbert Spencer, and eugenicists, such as Francis Galton, exerted enormous influence and lent credibility to generalised xenophobia. That these works were extended exercises in sophistry and casuistry need hardly be mentioned.

Colonialism went even further; because of what they thought they knew about Africa – a land of fantastical beasts and cannibals, slaves, "backward races" and so on – the colonial powers managed to convince themselves that they were subjugating Africans (and others) *for their own good*. European violence was going to stop the wars endemic to Africa, and their enlightened (over-)rule would be to the benefit of all (via Livingstone's ideas of "[Christianity, Civilisation and Commerce](https://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC/African%20Journals/pdfs/PULA/pula012001/pula012001004.pdf)").

The independence era of the late 1950s and 1960s saw more positive stories about Africa enter western discourses. The archives of British Pathé contain several clips of the Queen visiting her former colonies, with [this one](https://www.britishpathe.com/video/queen-in-sierra-leone-1) supposedly evidencing a bright future for Sierra Leone.

But coverage of the Nigerian civil war began a trend in western reporting that has lasted to the present. The UK tabloid the Sun called secessionist Biafra "The Land of No Hope", accompanying the piece with photos of the starving and the dead. It is not hard to trace a fairly straight line connecting headlines like this and contemporary reporting that trots out [clichés](https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2012/10/12/pol-vp-milewski-congon-francophonie.html) about the Heart of Darkness.

**The good: emerging, rising, vindicating**

But now, Africa is not only an emerging market; it's an [emerging continent](https://www.france24.com/en/20121012-hollande-senegal-speech-new-story-france-africa-end-franceafrique-dakar-sarkozy). Again, why now?

It is partly because some people think the best way to repudiate the negative stereotypes of Africa is to pump out wholly good news. An account on Twitter called [@AfricaGoodNews](https://twitter.com/AfricaGoodNews) is a case in point. Its handler tweets links to positive reportage of Africa: such "[Angola May Produce One Million Eggs a Day...](https://twitter.com/AfricaGoodNews/status/259943539524374528)" and "[Doing Business in Fast-Growing Africa - Europe Edition…](https://twitter.com/AfricaGoodNews/status/255543135856381952)".

It is one facet of a larger rebranding project. Whilst some observers may approve, seeing them as necessary correctives to the boilerplate journalism mentioned above, others are already finding them [clichéd and boring](https://africasacountry.com/2012/04/26/positive-news-from-africa/) or downright [misleading](https://africanarguments.org/2012/10/01/african-economies-rising-%E2%80%93-but-are-they-taking-the-people-with-them-%E2%80%93-by-richard-dowden/); a facile PR exercise designed to encourage (mainly western) investment. See the latest [issue](https://www.moneyweek.com/shop/issues/612) of Money Week if you want to be bombarded with statistics and given some ideas about where to put your dollars, pounds or euros. That there are resonances between some of this writing and 19th century imperialist propaganda may be cause for concern.

It is important to stress that however you assess the Africa Rising narrative's relative worth, its should not be discounted because some of the statistics may be unreliable. We are seeing more and more Africa Rising narratives because it is. And the changes are not confined to [economic growth](https://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2011/01/daily_chart) – large-scale political violence and war has also [declined](https://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/content/111/443/179.abstract) sharply over the past decade, for example. Things are indeed changing on the ground.

Nonetheless, it is demand for the stuff underneath it – Africa's mineral and oil wealth – that is driving the economic growth behind all these narratives. The Bric economies, and China in particular, have fuelled a commodities [boom](https://africanarguments.org/2012/07/05/africa-rising-when-will-the-west-join-africa-by-eliot-pence-bright-simons/) that has benefited state coffers across the continent, though questions remain over the actual extent (and the equities) of this boom.

But perhaps the central reason we are seeing all this "good news" in western media links back to the west's own idea of itself and of Africa. Africans are now, "finally", playing by the west's rules; the supposedly redemptive power of capitalism [(pdf)](https://www.asauk.net/downloads/newsletters/12/asauk_news_oct12.pdf) coupled with the increasing adoption of liberal-democracy in Africa vindicates the Western Way. Moreover, feelings of decline in the west – stubbornly low economic growth (or collapse), the threat of social upheaval, the rise of China, and so on – have made all these Africa Rising narratives all the more breathless. The Economist, Money Week, and the rest seem to see in Africa's rise hope for the west's recovery. Is Africa Rising, then, because the west *needs* it to?

**Always something new?**

Africa is the "continent of extremes", according to well-informed [sources](https://www.taylorsofharrogate.co.uk/subcatcoffee.asp?catid=133)like Taylors of Harrogate, which sells tea and coffee. In the West, Africa is portrayed either as the Heart of Darkness, with Africans suffering from that quartet of disease, poverty, famine and war, or as Rising, phoenix-like, the living and "vibrant" [repudiation](https://rjionline.org/ccj/commentary/africa-tribal-europe-ethnic-power-words-media) of all those worrying signs that perhaps capitalism – as it currently conducted – may not suit our increasingly "globalised" world.

The Manichaean quality [(pdf)](https://www.asauk.net/downloads/newsletters/12/asauk_news_oct12.pdf) of these narratives is difficult to escape; the (good) trio of liberalism, democracy and capitalism seems to be talking hold in Africa – but only if "we in the west" can help Africa defeat the (bad) trio of traditionalism ("tribalism"), authoritarianism, and "poor macroeconomic policy" (usually an oblique reference to China). These reductive binary oppositions are signs of overly simplistic thinking, infantilising not only Africans but also the westerners who read about them.

In [response](https://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-africa_democracy/agency_2796.jsp) to these crude generalisations, there has been a growing [chorus](https://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jan/24/africa-media-rwanda-homosexuality) of [voices](https://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jan/24/africa-media-rwanda-homosexuality) calling for better reporting of Africa. More nuanced, contextualised and balanced reporting is not something anyone would disagree with. But this should not just apply to negative stories. Un-contextualised, simplified and wholly positive stories will only lead to further misunderstanding. Africa must, and can only, be understood on its own terms. Initiatives like [Uganda Speaks](https://ugandaspeaks.com/) and [Global Voices](https://globalvoicesonline.org/), and the BBC's recruitment of African reporters, are a good start. The more westerners learn about Africa from Africans, the better. But if they remain in the minority, we will end up having another [single story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html) of Africa that is almost as misleading and distorted as the one we had before.