

## Call for Papers for *Politique Africaine*

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### ***The politics of nostalgia: remains of development and traces of modernity in Africa***

Contemporary Africa is nostalgic. After two decades of structural adjustment and neoliberal policies, the old days are often referred to as a golden age – be it the colonial past, the time of Independence or the 1980s. Always complex and ambivalent, these discourses point to material signs of decline: deserted plantations, wrecked tractors, abandoned mines, empty clinics. In a changing landscape, marked by the withdrawal of the State from the centre stage of development and by the rise of new transnational actors, from US big Philanthropy to Chinese investments, nostalgic narratives often take development itself as their object – as a State-led political project, guided by international expertise and generosity, and promising a better future for the nation.

This issue examines the political dimension of material and affective traces left in Africa by development projects – conceived in the broad sense of interventions designed to transform the societies and environments by economic investment, educative or humanitarian action, public health and scientific experiment, from small scale community-based programs to agro-industrial projects of regional scope.

Evocations of modernity – colonial, nationalist, socialist – as an unfulfilled promise should not be dismissed as mere sentimentalism. We argue that, rooted in class and generation cleavages, they are the site where a political diagnosis can be articulated. The nostalgic register brings together and contrasts distinct temporalities of government and forms of moral authority, offering a space to expose and debate conceptions of the public, citizenship, the role of the State and Africa's place in the world.

This issue will offer a series of explorations on how present-day Africa is made of an “interlocking of presents, pasts and futures” (Mbembe) conflating eras and temporalities, from the unachieved expectations of modernization to impatient anticipations of the “emergence” of African States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this temporal regime, the past and the futures it bears become a critical standpoint and a political field of struggles. This issue is focused on the politics of nostalgia in present-day Africa, taking their materiality as an analytical entry to rethink the history and anthropology of development.

## *A nostalgic turn in African studies*

Post-development melancholy is a recurring theme, almost a cliché, in recent artistic and literary production on or about the continent, which academic reflections are beginning to tackle. Photographers such as Guy Tillim (*Avenue Patrice Lumumba*) or Sammy Baloji (*The Beautiful Time*) are prominent examples; the literary narrative by Jacob Dlamini, *Native nostalgia*, which discusses, through the autobiographical genre, the possibility of a Black nostalgia for the Apartheid regime spurred a series of debates in South Africa. Beyond their aesthetical value, these works also force us to think beyond the over-discussed issue of colonial memory or nostalgia, making the temporal and political boundaries commonly used to engage with these topics fuzzier.

In the wake of James Ferguson's "ethnography of decline" in post-industrial Zambia, a string of recent works has engaged the issue of nostalgia. Anthropologist Wenzel Geissler has shared the daily life of retired workers of the Kenyan Ministry of Health *Division of Vector-Borne Diseases* (DVBD): next to stranded Land Rovers, the old men of the DVBD remember the time of nation-wide eradication campaigns, when the DVBD was present throughout the country and trained generations of scientists who embodied the future of a nation. Geissler shows that their nostalgia bears within itself another temporality: an opening to the future, "a longing, a desire", which is articulated to a spatial "notion of forwardness". More than regret for a lost modernity, the nostalgia of DVBD men is also a way of keeping alive the idea of a collective and common future, to be imagined and achieved through science – a future which the epidemic of "projects" under the contemporary regime of global health fails to embody. In other contexts, ethnographic and historical researches about public health in Africa (Kamat, Lachenal) have identified similar discourses, where the authoritarian interventions of the colonial and post-colonial state become objects of desire: public health, taken as the intervention of a state which "takes care of its population" (Chabrol) being experienced by patients and workers not as lack but as *loss*.

The nostalgic turn is also visible in development as well as in urban studies (Gervais-Lambony); our hypothesis is that it has a historicity. In order to understand why it has gained momentum, it is important to reduce it neither to an artefact of oral history, nor to a generation bias, nor even to a purely strategic critique of the neoliberal present. Although it bears the imprint of all this, it is also tied to the affective and intimate dimension of institutions, imaginations, and practices of development. It reminds us that modernization had at its core a political project: a promise of success and self-fulfilment ("emergence") to individuals and nations, which clearly have been lost on the way.

Thus, expressions of nostalgia for a more or less determined "before", pose multiple challenges. As manifestations of regret for the colonial era or postcolonial authoritarian regimes (Bissel), those discourses are politically and epistemologically unsettling. They force us to acknowledge the local pertinence of analytically dubious concepts such as "modernity" or "progress" – a task quite familiar to Africanists (Ferguson). In addition they also question established modes of periodizing, as they point to the neoliberal moment (rather than the Independences) as the most significant shift in contemporary history – indexing what Charles Piot terms a "post-nostalgic" era.

## ***Traces, remains and ruins: towards a political anthropology of the interlocking of times***

The specific angle, through which we invite to tackle these burgeoning reflections on nostalgia for development, is to follow its material traces, tracking down the social and political life of remnants, ruins, debris, archives and memories of modernity. A recent focus on material and tangible forms of the presence of the past has proved a forceful way of reconsidering these issues (see for instance Guillaume Lachenal, *Kin Porn*). The volume edited by Ann Stoler on imperial ruins, and imperialism as a process of “ruination”, demonstrates the theoretical and political value of an anthropology of the left-overs of colonial and postcolonial history, from urban decay to devastated environments rendered toxic. This framework is yet to be developed on African settings, and its strictly imperial scope needs to be questioned.

Our collective investigation builds on recent studies of colonial memory and the uses of the past – understood as strategic uses of past events in the form of commemorations, “memory wars” and claims of heritage (see in French the special issues of *Cahiers d'études africaines* and *Politique africaine*). However we intend to move beyond the standard view of memory as a reconstruction of the past determined by present stakes and categories. How can we explore the coexistence of heterogeneous temporalities within the present? How can we challenge the textbook periodization of political history (colonization, Independence, etc.) to identify other sequences and rhythms: the life-cycles of projects, techniques and goods; the temporalities of decay affecting buildings, bodies and landscapes; the lapses and confusions in memories?

Choosing a contemporary object such as development paradoxically allows us to move the chronological framework of memory studies – problematizing in new ways, for example, the layers, beginnings and ends which constitute the “past”. Our perspective draws from the recent renewal of approaches to memory, from anthropological works which point to the intricate interplay between collective and individual layers of memory (Cole, Carsten), to the archaeology of the contemporary (Olivier; Harrison & Schofield; Buchli & Lucas), as well as studies of the non-discursive forms of memory and forgetting in Africa (Argenti, Fassin).

The editors expect original papers grounded in empirical research. We invite propositions taking nostalgia as a heuristic entry, rather than as all-encompassing interpretation, and without positing it automatically as the dominant politico-affective register in the context under study.

### **Schedule/deadlines**

- 11 November 2013: deadline to submit paper proposals (max. 7000 characters including blank spaces) to the coordinators ([lachenal@univ-paris-diderot.fr](mailto:lachenal@univ-paris-diderot.fr) & [mbodj@cnrs.fr](mailto:mbodj@cnrs.fr))
- 25 November 2013: notification to the authors of accepted proposals
- 17 February 2014: deadline for submission of the full papers by the selected authors to the journal (50 000 characters including blank spaces)
- October 2014: publication of the papers accepted by *Politique africaine*'s editorial board.

## **Quoted works**

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Lachenal, Guillaume, 2013, Kin Porn, posté sur : <http://somatosphere.net/2013/01/kin-porn.html>

Mbembe, Joseph-Achille, *De la postcolonie : essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine*. Paris: Karthala, 2000.

Olivier, Laurent, *Le sombre abîme du temps: mémoire et archéologie, La couleur des idées*. Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2008.

*Politique africaine*, « Mémoires grises. Pratiques politiques du passé colonial entre Europe et Afrique », coordonné par Christine Deslaurier & Aurélie Roger, n° 102, juin 2006.

Stoler, Ann Laura, *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.