

BOOK REVIEW

Matthew Graham. *Contemporary Africa*. London: Red Globe Press, 2019. 291 pp. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. \$39.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1137500335.

Contemporary Africa is a good introductory text for both undergraduate students and general readers interested in Africa. It is written by a historian, but there is an interdisciplinary approach that includes political science, geography, economics, sociology, and anthropology. Political Science is examined in chapters dealing with political systems, political violence, social movements, and civil society, and Africa beyond the nation-state. Geography is examined in the introductory chapter that seeks to define what Africa is, and another chapter that covers land and people. Economics is given its own chapter, but as with any book on contemporary Africa, the subject permeates other chapters as well, given the question of Africa's persistent underdevelopment in the post-colonial age. Sociology and anthropology are accorded a treatment similar to economics. There is one chapter dedicated to popular culture, but there are undercurrents of sociology and anthropology in other chapters.


The book begins by asking what Africa is, before inevitably tackling the big questions that are often asked about the continent. Matthew Graham answers the first question by looking at geography and political science, taking the whole continent into account. This also extends to most of the island states: Mauritius, Seychelles, Cape Verde, Comoros, and São Tomé and Príncipe. The argument is made that these micro-states deserve to be tied to the continent because at independence they intentionally decided to tie their fate to the rest of the continent by joining the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the forerunner of the African Union (AU). Only those islands that are not independent states (Réunion and Mayotte) are excluded from the analysis. The author also keeps North Africa within the scope of the analysis, since he sees the region's politics as inextricably intertwined with the rest of the continent. The allusion is made to pan-African movements; in the early days of independence, Gamal Abdel Nasser was a strong advocate of pan-Africanism. Graham points to Algeria's close role in the liberation movements of several African states before independence. Closer to the present, up until his death, Muammar Gaddafi was a strong proponent of the vision of a United States of Africa. Implied is the notion that pan-Arabism and pan-Africanism are not mutually exclusive. Of course, this notion is not commonly held today. However, Morocco's successful run to the semi-finals of last year's FIFA Men's World Cup shows vestiges of this spirit.

The interdisciplinary approach helps Graham to avoid "the danger of a single story." The single story is the biggest gripe of famed author Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi with much of the contemporary analysis of Africa by foreigners, whether

they be politicians, scholars, media organizations, or international aid agencies. The “single story” of Africa always equates the entire continent with authoritarianism, civil war, corruption, disease, ignorance, poverty, and failed states, in short, all the negative stereotypes. The popular culture chapter is a breath of fresh air that is often missing from other comprehensive texts such as this. Graham weaves into the analysis literature, film, music, and sports. Europe’s influence in sports is particularly pernicious. Football (or soccer) remains the most popular sport on the continent. However, the most ardent supporters of European leagues and teams such as Manchester United are found on the African continent. The best African players have been recruited by European teams. African leagues continue to lag in term of infrastructure, and they only serve as a poaching ground for foreign leagues. Climate change, technology, and Africa beyond the nation state are other useful thematic updates. Given that this is an introductory text, and one that does a good job of updating the empirical literature on Africa as whole in a comprehensive yet concise manner, arguments for the inclusion of missing or undertreated cases can sound disingenuous. But I do have to point out a few that deserve mention. Eritrea remains a black hole of information. This tiny state should be of theoretical interest since it is the only totalitarian regime on the continent. Graham’s text does an excellent job of bringing the diaspora into the scope of analysis of contemporary Africa. This is a constituency that is often missing from much scholarly analysis, despite its enormous influence on the continent, especially economically. Remittances are the biggest source of foreign reserves for many countries. Eritrea is an especially important case, since it also contributes to the migrant refugee crisis in Europe to a greater degree than is often realized.

Reflecting the heterogeneity of African Studies, Graham’s text invites a variety of possible interpretations from various social scientists which could open new lines of inquiry. While Graham closes the book with musings on technology, climate change, and education as key drivers in shaping the continent’s future, it would be interesting to hear the perspectives of sociologists and anthropologists on this “new” Africa. The cellphone revolution has brought rural and urban Africa closer, but they remain separate in many ways. The geography of the continent has always shaped its politics and economics, but climate change makes geography even more salient.

There are other Africa digests available, and this book could serve as a starting point for the curious reader or Africanist scholar. John Reader’s magisterial account, *Africa: A Biography of the Continent*, stretches into 818 pages. Martin Meredith’s *The Fate of Africa: A History of the Continent Since Independence* runs to 789 pages. *Contemporary Africa* is written in a very accessible style without dumbing down the text or catering to lazy stereotypes. This book says what it has to say in a succinct and readable 291 pages.

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