

2016

Ahlers, Theodore, Hiroshi Kato, Harinder Kohli, Callisto Madavo, and Anil Sood, eds. *Africa 2050: Realizing the Continent's Full Potential*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2014, 489 pp.

James Lance

Kumarian Press, jlance007@comcast.net

Follow this and additional works at: <http://encompass.eku.edu/jora>

Recommended Citation

Lance, James. "Ahlers, Theodore, Hiroshi Kato, Harinder Kohli, Callisto Madavo, and Anil Sood, eds. *Africa 2050: Realizing the Continent's Full Potential*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2014, 489 pp.." *Journal of Retracing Africa*: Vol. 3, Issue 1 (2016): 62-65. <http://encompass.eku.edu/jora/vol3/iss1/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Retracing Africa* by an authorized editor of Encompass. For more information, please contact Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu.

Ahlers, Theodore, Hiroshi Kato, Harinder Kohli, Callisto Madavo, and Anil Sood, eds. *Africa 2050: Realizing the Continent's Full Potential*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2014, xxvii + 489 pp.

The thinking among scholars and other experts about Africa in the last few decades has coalesced around two separate but not necessarily opposing perspectives. There are the Afro-pessimists who see the proverbial glass as being half-empty. They point out the corruption, the poverty and rapid population growth, the violence and pandemics such as HIV/AIDs and more recently, Ebola in West Africa, as indicators of a rampant malaise out of which it may well be impossible for Africans to emerge completely. The best that can be hoped for is that through Western aid and largesse, the continent will have a bright future and that the glass does not become totally depleted. Then there are the Afro-optimists who see the glass as half full. They note the consistently impressive economic growth of many African countries during the past decade or so, the improvements in health care, the increase in liberal democratic principles throughout the continent and the emergence of a nascent and burgeoning middle class in a number of African countries.

Both the editors and the contributors to *Africa 2050: Realizing the Continent's Full Potential* are Afro-optimists. The essays in this book—the product of a study commissioned by the African Union, the UN Economic Commission for Africa, and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency—posit that by 2050, the African glass will be full and possibly brimming over. Bond and Fajgenbaum (324), two contributors to the volume, claim that by in 2050 “Africa could be the factory and granary to the world” or that at the very least, most African economies would have reached the level obtained at present by Chile, which has diversified its economy and become globally competitive in a number of sectors.

The authors assume that in general the world will be at peace with no major wars or calamities affecting a large portion of humanity. Second, they assume that the already apparent shift in the balance of the global economy from North America and Europe to emerging markets will also be a peaceful process. Third, the authors assume ongoing stability in global financial trading systems. Fourth, climate change will remain within the parameters set at present by the less negative members of the international scientific community. Fifth, improvements in technology will be similar to those of the last century with similar results leading to enhanced productivity and overall well-being. As I write this review, however, the Ebola outbreak is affecting lives and livelihoods in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. Perhaps the authors should have added a sixth assumption about minimizing the likelihood of pandemic contagious disease severely disrupting, if not destroying

outright, African lives and potentials. Achieving this degree of African success will not be automatic. Aggressive African leadership and sustained and focused action are vital. The book outlines three possible outcomes.

The best case is effective African convergence with the global political economy with per capita incomes in Africa increasing by 4.6 % annually so that by 2050, per capita incomes throughout the continent average \$17,000 (higher than Russia, Malaysia, Mexico and Turkey today). The size of the middle class throughout the continent would increase from its current 12 % of the population to a hefty 68 percent. Then there is the business as usual scenario with per capita incomes rising 1.9 % annually so that by 2050, the continental average is \$6,000. The size of the middle class increases but only to about 27 % of the population. The worst possible outcome is the downside scenario that has African terms of trade deteriorating and conflict endemic so that per capita incomes grow by less than 1 percent and more than 680 million Africans remain mired in poverty.

Although the authors make no claims to comprehensiveness, the book is ambitious, sprawling, and cheerful. The scope and persistent “can do” attitude of the book’s contributors are key reasons, not only for the book’s charm, but for the book’s importance. It is not a book to be read at once cover to cover in one sitting, but a book to be savored, and it is a book that inspires faith and confidence in Africans and their abilities. Sixteen chapters cover critical issues, among them job creation and employment, demography, governance, equity and social inclusion, human capital, natural resources and agriculture, urbanization, climate change, and regional cooperation and continental integration. Each chapter outlines the context and history that has led to the current moment in African development and each chapter provides an Action Agenda that will help Africans realize the prosperity and affluence convergence scenario by 2050.

While I have reservations about some Action Agenda prescriptions—for example, a somewhat unfiltered faith in solutions such as biotechnology and GMOs as a way to increase crop yields; or unresolved tensions between the repeated calls in the book for African unity and the equally repeated recognition that diversity, culture, and geography call for many African countries to embrace individual and self-reliant trajectories—I have no doubt that Africans can achieve these *Africa 2050* goals. The authors stress African capabilities, agency, and choice. In this regard, I do have some questions. Among the questions that I ask are: Do Africans want to achieve this vision in the manner suggested? And is this book really about something bigger than Africa?

Here is where I see congruence in the perspectives of the Afro-pessimists and Afro-optimists. Both adhere to what I call the becoming “one of us” conditionality. “Us” in this case means the modern, developed, capitalist West with its economic,

political, and social institutions and practices. Becoming “one of us” provided considerable ideological justification for the colonizing project and continues in economic and political development programs for post-colonial Africa. Thus both pessimists and optimists see Africans’ becoming “one of us” as a consummation devoutly to be wished; they just exhibit opposing levels of confidence over what Africans can achieve. And as Francis Fukuyama assumed in his famous end of history piece, all of the essays in the book frame liberal democracy and free market capitalism as the inevitable, indeed, the only possible trajectory the world’s peoples can follow. There are no systematic alternatives to these Western, but now assumed to be universal, pathways.

But when one looks at how this trajectory is playing out in the United States, the most powerful exemplar of the Western way—and is being replicated in many of the BRICS (Brazil, India, and China)—I question the desirability, not the possibility of attaining, the vision promoted in *Africa 2050*. In the US, the middle class has remained stagnant or shrunk while a privileged affluent oligarchy controls the economy and politics. The quality of education in the US has declined drastically to the extent that US students lag severely behind many of their counterparts in developed countries in math and verbal skills. An increasingly privatized and free market health care system victimizes those who lack the means or insurance to cover health care costs. Environmentally, resource extraction practices such as hydraulic fracturing wreak havoc on the land and the health of the people inhabiting it. These are but a few of the policies and practices done in the name of increasing productivity, sustaining consistently higher levels of economic growth and enhancing the competitive position of the US globally. I recognize that there may be elements of caricature and hyperbole in my critique of the US, but I think *Africa 2050* would have been an even better book had the essayists been more reflective about alternatives to their vision and the array of decisions and choices Africans have to make between now and 2050.

It is the need to conceive of alternatives to seemingly universal models and practices that makes me see this book as one that transcends its African subject. The book is really asking what kind of world all of us as cosmopolitan citizens want to live in by 2050. And in what ways can Africans contribute to a more just, more economically and environmentally sustainable world? In short, while it would be useful for Africans to think about positive ways to become more like “us,” many of “us” have to be more open to exploring economic and social models not based primarily on the productivity and growth imperatives of neoliberal capitalism. The existential stakes are too high not to consider alternatives to the ones presented in this book. Africans, I believe, have much to offer us as we embark on this exploration so that we all can reach our full potential and live to tell about it.

James Lance
Senior Editor, Anthropology and Social Sciences
Cornell University Press, NY