

Afro-Pessimism: The Limits of a Concept¹

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Abstract:

Afro-pessimism can be defined as a negative or “pessimistic” perspective on the future of Africa, rooted in the continent's history and current situation. The concept, used since the late 1980s, argues that Africa's challenges are unsolvable and that its future will resemble its past. Within this framework, the study will address the concept of Afro-pessimism with a holistic approach and seek to answer the questions, “What are the issues with the concept of Afro-pessimism? What criticisms can be made of this concept?”. This study first examines the emergence and content of the concept, and then demonstrates how it is used, particularly in the media and related studies. In conclusion, the study argues that there are two fundamental issues related to Afro-pessimism. Firstly, negative news about Africa in the media reinforces a pessimistic view of the continent; secondly, there is a tendency to generalize negative events in specific countries to “Africa” as a whole.

Keywords:

Africa; Afro-Pessimism; Media; Hopeless Continent; Dark Continent.

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Introduction

“At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit.” (Hegel, 1899, p. 99).

Parents often criticize children who refuse to eat by saying, “Children in Africa don't have access to this food.” This phrase, repeated for decades, can be given as an example from everyday life that shows how Africa is perceived and how attitudes toward the continent have not changed. Bora (2003, p. 144) provides a similar example, noting that people react to anti-democratic or “uncivilized” practices by claiming, “Such a thing could not even be seen in Uganda”. As Evans (2011, p. 399) states: “The news out of Africa is bad [...] because bad things are happening there”. Mazrui wrote at the beginning of his 1986 book, “Things are not going well in Africa.” (1992, p. 13). Does this statement from 40 years ago still hold true?

Afro-pessimism can be seen clearly when one considers the real problems present in much of the continent, the increasing prevalence of negative news about the continent in the media, and the prejudices against its people (Gordon and Wolpe, 1998, p. 54). The designation of Africa as the “Dark Continent” was achieved by ignoring all historical knowledge and relations with Africa. Re-invented in the 19th century, the idea of “Black Africa” gained widespread popularity, particularly in the Tarzan novels written by the American author Edgar Rice Burroughs in 1912. The author, who knew the continent from books titled “Dark Continent” (Stanley, 1890) and never actually visited to Africa, described it as a wild, primitive, and isolated place (Bassil, 2011, pp. 379, 394).

There are two possible approaches to researching Afro-pessimism. The first is to demonstrate Africa's progress in economics, education, security, sports, and similar areas through data, thereby showing the continent's development and offering optimistic predictions about its future. Thus, it is possible to demonstrate that Afro-pessimism is incorrect. The second approach involves conducting a study that justifies pessimistic interpretations of the continent's future by providing statistical evidence of the dire situation in Africa, including coups, democratic instability, poverty and food shortages. Thus, it is possible to justify the concept of Afro-pessimism.

This study isn't about the Black struggle in the United States or racism against Black people in the United States. Similar issues in Europe are also outside the scope of this study. Instead, this study focuses solely to analyze the pessimistic perspective towards the African continent. It aims to examine the concept from a holistic perspective by focusing on the construction of Afro-pessimism. Studies on Afro-pessimism have generally focused on negative (pessimistic) news about Africa published in the media of various countries. It appears that there are no studies that specifically address the concept of Afro-pessimism. Therefore, this study focuses on the content of the concept of Afro-pessimism and seeks to answer the following questions, “What are the issues

with the concept of Afro-pessimism? What criticisms can be made of this concept?”. It will first examine the origins and content of the concept of Afro-pessimism, and the following section will discuss various studies related to the topic.

The Birth of the Concept and its Content

The term Afro-pessimism was first used in 1987 by the French Minister of Cooperation, Michel Aurillac, in an article published in *Le Monde* regarding economic development and political democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa (Wacquant, 2023). Nothias (2015, p. 42), however, explains the first use of the concept in a different way. It was first used in an article by Aurillac titled “France: creditors should do more for Africa’s debt problem” published by China’s Xinhua News Agency on March 27, 1988. Following these journalistic origins, Hawkins (1990, p. 205) used the concept for the first time in an academic study as “So widespread and deeply rooted is Afro-pessimism [...]” (Nothias, 2015, p. 42).

Following the era of decolonization, the initial sympathy toward newly independent African states shifted. The optimism of the 1960s was replaced by a new discourse: Afro-pessimism. Although the phenomenon of Afro-pessimism seems to have been ongoing for decades, its discursive origins can actually be traced back at least to 15th-century Western consciousness. The perspective of Europeans who first arrived on the continent shares some similarities with the perspective seen today: Africa cannot succeed on its own (de B’béri & Louw, 2011, p. 337-338).

Africa, which lost its people to slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is still referred to as a “continent” dependent on the support of donors and aid organizations in the twenty-first century. Afro-pessimism is reinforced by the fact that Africa is constantly associated with famine, war, coups, debt, poverty, and AIDS (Momoh, 2003, p. 33). It is generally defined as pessimistic attitude toward the continent’s ability to cope with its many problems such as poverty, governance and health. (Béni, 2021, p. 190). According to Schorr (2011, p. 23), Afro-pessimism is “briefly, the perception that ‘Africa’ has always been and will continue to be a scary, backward and poverty-ridden place”. Similarly, Leys (1996) addresses the numerous challenges facing Africa and argues that the continent’s future remains bleak due to these persistent issues:

“[...] Africa is not in fact balanced on a knife’s edge between recovery or collapse: it is a tragedy that is already far advanced. Millions of people have already died from hunger, disease and violence, and millions more face Hobbesian existences in conditions of accelerating environmental and social degradation: famines, chronic malnutrition, the collapse of health services, the erosion of education, reappearing endemic and epidemic diseases, AIDS, endemic criminal violence, civil wars, genocide [...] very few people believe that things in Africa are going to get better [...]” (p. 188).

If Africa were truly as hopeless as it is portrayed, multinational corporations would not be operating on the continent. It continues to be depicted as an underdeveloped continent so that Africans remain hopeless and desperate about their own future. In other words, “Afro-pessimism is an invented ideology”. Therefore, Afro-pessimism is not a fair or accurate political reflection of the actual mood of the African people. Rather, it is a racist ideology that represents a continuation of the “dark continent” thesis and the prejudicial view that “nothing good can ever come out of Africa.” (Momoh, 2003, p. 34).

The production of an “insecure Africa” is a narrative constructed by Afro-pessimists. Africa, often associated with civil wars or gang wars, has been transformed into a geography of violence, portraying the continent as a place defined by evil and conflict (Akçay, 2020). Conversely, Ahwireng-Obeng (2003) argues that Afro-pessimism is an unfounded discourse, noting that the concept has not gained universal acceptance due to the positive outcomes of economic development in Africa. Furthermore, he contends that such economic improvements foster optimism rather than pessimism.

A key argument of Afro-pessimists is the portrayal of Africa as a monolithic entity, evaluating African countries collectively (Evans, 2011, p. 404). Afro-pessimism has also been interpreted as the belief that Africa is the only region where the future is likely to be worse than its past. This perspective is rooted in the post-colonial realities of Africa and the limited levels of political and economic development in post-independence countries. The failure of independence to bring about an improved living conditions in many African countries has weakened optimistic views about Africa (Rieff, 1998/1999, p. 10). The colonial powers made no distinction between Arabs and Black peoples. For example, when Algerians fought their war of independence against French colonialism, they recognized that all African peoples shared a common struggle, and therefore, regardless of whether someone was “black” or Arab, they sought support from other African countries in the spirit of Pan-Africanism (Momoh, 2003, p. 37). When examining the continent of “Africa,” it is difficult to assess the differences ranging from skin color to the “unity” of more than 50 countries. The characterization of North African uprisings as the “Arab Spring” rather than as an African phenomenon illustrates this conceptual divide (Nothias, 2012, p. 55). Furthermore, the fact that students coming from Sub-Saharan African countries to North African countries for education are considered as “African students” highlights this difference (Moussa, 2022, p. 70). While Latin American footballers playing for European teams are referred to by their specific nationality, such as Argentinian or Brazilian, African footballers are often referred to simply as African (Ülker, 2016, p. 8).

The rise of Afro-pessimism homogenizes the so-called “African tragedy,” overlooking important differences and demonstrating that Africa lacks the political will and capacity to deal with its own problems. This concept largely portrays Africa’s situation as a consequence of its own actions and therefore argues that there is no hope of solving the continent's problems. Thus, it provided an opportunity for former colonial powers and the West in general to withdraw from Africa, despite the fact that many of these

problems were largely created by them (Ahluwalia, 2000, p. 30). Etounga-Manguelle (2000, p. 66) argues that colonial powers can no longer be held responsible for the current situation in Africa. He notes that despite decades of independence and the establishment of sovereign governments, many African nations remain more dependent on wealthy countries than ever before.

Some Studies Related to the Concept

Fair noted that when she asked her students what came to mind when they heard the words “Africa” and “Africans” during her lessons, they offered the following responses:

“To my students, ‘Africa’ is: ‘a basketcase,’ ‘jungle-covered,’ ‘big game, safari,’ ‘impoverished,’ ‘falling apart,’ ‘famine-plagued,’ ‘full of war,’ ‘AIDS-ridden,’ ‘torn by apartheid,’ ‘weird,’ ‘brutal,’ ‘savage,’ ‘primitive,’ ‘backward,’ ‘tribal,’ ‘undeveloped,’ and ‘black.’ Moreover, my students describe ‘Africans’ as: ‘having AIDS,’ ‘lazy,’ ‘crazy,’ ‘corrupt,’ ‘troubled,’ ‘underdeveloped’ ‘fight[ing] all the time,’ ‘brutal,’ ‘savage,’ ‘exotic,’ ‘sexually active,’ ‘backward,’ ‘tribal,’ ‘primitive,’ and again ‘black.’ (1993, p. 5).

Schorr (2011, pp. 28-36) discusses eight elements of Afro-pessimism. The first of these is homogeneity. The term 'Africa' is frequently used as if it refers to a single country rather than a continent. This leads to all the negative developments occurring in more than 50 countries being grouped together and perceived as events happening in “Africa”. The second is the colonial mythology known as the “Dark Continent”. This view argues that Africa is a place that has made no contribution to world history and is the darkest place in history. Thus, it is assumed that “bad things” have always happened “there”. Thirdly, there is the perception, which also existed during the colonial period, that Africa is a source of disease. For example, Africa is very frequently mentioned in news regarding AIDS. Fourth, Africa is portrayed as a place of starvation. In Western media, “children with swollen bellies, flies around their heads and pleading looks” are frequently shown. Fifth, Africa is represented as being limited to National Geographic. It is a widespread perception that Africans continue to live in small tribes in their villages, as they did in the pre-colonial era. Violent conflicts between tribes can also be mentioned as the sixth reason. The instability arising from tribes constantly engaged in violent conflict remains a problem. The problem of governance and political instability in Africa is the seventh reason. Civil wars and coups in Africa create an image of a continent composed of countries incapable of governing themselves. Finally, it is possible to state the perception of poverty on the continent based on many economic indicators. These factors contribute to reinforcing Africa's negative image. They reinforce a monolithic and pessimistic portrayal of Africa in the global consciousness.

Momoh (2003, pp. 33-34, 51) characterizes Afro-pessimism as the ideology of a diverse group of actors. These groups can be identified as “many of the Africanists, the donor and charity community, international money-lenders, some neo-liberal and

postmodernist African scholars, and above all, some New Left converts”. Afro-pessimism is viewed as a result of the West's failure to explain the political, social, and economic realities of Africa. Furthermore, rather than acknowledging this analytical failure, Afro-pessimists have blamed Africans for Africa's “bad” situation.

The Economist, in its May 2000 issue titled “The Hopeless Continent” addressed the issue of Africa. Overall, pessimism leads to a lack of belief that the African continent can overcome its problems such as poverty, health, and development. When these approaches are examined, Afro-pessimism suggests a discourse of measurement that evaluates the continent's failures based on standards defined by the West (Nothias, 2012, pp. 54,57). It is also possible to illustrate the limitations of the “continent” approach towards Africa with an example from Europe. For instance, while the genocides in Bosnia and Albania are never used to represent Europe as a whole, the use of the term “Africa” for events occurring in some African countries has become a general practice (Gilbert and Reynolds, 2008, p. 418).

As shown in Figure 1, categories (1) and (2) indicate that Africa has been inaccurately assessed by Western racists or media, suggesting that the continent's challenges do not inherently originate from Africa itself. In categories (3) and (4), the challenges of Africa are discussed, and the problems of African governments are particularly emphasized. (5) refers to the hopelessness of Africa and the insolubility of its problems. Therefore, it is possible to consider (5) as the most extreme Afro-pessimist position.

	<i>(1) Africa is misrepresented by racists</i>	<i>(2) Africa is misrepresented by Western media</i>	<i>(3) Africa is in trouble but it can be fixed</i> <i>Version 1</i>	<i>(4) Africa is in trouble but it can be fixed</i> <i>Version 2</i>	<i>(5) Africa is hopeless and cannot be fixed</i>
<i>What is the problem?</i>	Africans are portrayed negatively by Western racists	Africa is portrayed negatively by Western media	African client states are run by poor leaders	Africa is badly run and Africans are incapable of governing themselves	Africans are incapable of running things
<i>Who is to blame?</i>	Racists negatively stereotype Africans (Western racism is the problem, not Africa)	Journalists construct negative representations (Western media are the problem, not Africa)	Bad African governments and neo colonialism (The West is complicit in the problem)	Africans are to blame (The West is not the problem, it is the solution)	Africans are to blame (The West is not the problem or the solution)

<i>What is the solution?</i>	Attack racist portrayals	Rebrand Africa to create good representations	New African leaders are needed to create better governance	Recolonisation (by the West, the UN or China)	Give up on Africa, excise it from the world community
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Figure 1: Afro-pessimism Types. Source: de B'éri & Louw, 2011, p. 336.

The Economist, in its December 2011 issue, changed its approach from its previous “the hopeless continent” narrative by choosing “Africa Rising” as its cover title. *The Economist's* shift in perspective on Africa has been interpreted as confirmation of the continent's changing economic conditions. In November 2012, in an interesting coincidence, *Time's* cover was the same as *The Economist's* cover the previous year: “Africa rising”. The cover in question appeared in *Time's* European, Middle Eastern, and African editions; it was not used in the US and Asian editions. *Time's* cover from March 30, 1998, makes the situation even more interesting: “Africa Rising” (Maritz, 2012). It is also possible to give an example a story titled “Africa: A Grim Picture” from *The Washington Post* dated June 21, 1997 (Ahwireng-Obeng, 2003, p. 141). These shifting dates and thematic similarities illustrate how narratives of both African progress and pessimism are constructed. Perry (2012) argues that the transition between “pessimism” and “rising” is complex, stating that “but if Afro-pessimism is outdated, undiluted Afro-optimism is premature”.

Gilbert and Reynolds (2008, pp. xviii- xix) discuss various perceptions of Africa. These perceptions generally reinforce Afro-pessimistic views. They include primitive Africa, wild and dangerous Africa, exotic Africa, unspoiled Africa, utopian Africa, and broken Africa. It is particularly important to note that all these diverse understandings of Africa are not entirely wrong. In fact, it is possible to find evidence supporting each of these claims. However, there are also many situations that are not as perceived. For instance, there are rhinos and lions in Africa, but most Africans have never seen either of them. While contemporary Africa continues to grapple with challenges such as poverty and conflict, these singular narratives fail to capture the continent's full complexity.

In their study, Schraeder and Endless (1998, pp. 30-32) found that 73% of the 1168 articles about Africa published in *The New York Times* between 1955 and 1995 contained negative content. Béni (2021, pp. 184-190) notes that the term “Africa” is preferred even when a country or region is mentioned in the news. Several examples illustrate this tendency toward overgeneralization. For instance, in the headline “EU would stop the refugee influx with African investment,” the word “Africa” specifically refers to North Africa within the article. Likewise, in the headline “NBA to open academies in Africa and India,” “Africa” actually refers to Senegal. This practice reinforces Afro-pessimism as a simplistic approach that does not differentiate between African countries. Consequently, if a negative development occurs in “Africa,” it is

frequently attributed to “Africa” as a whole, even if the event affects only a specific country or region. Furthermore, the most frequently used verbs in these headlines, such as “die,” “kill,” “attack,” “want,” and “shoot,” all have negative connotations. In her analysis of 382 articles from Hungarian online news outlets between January 1, 2015, and December 31, 2017. According to the sentiment analysis conducted on the news, 58% were negative and 26% were positive. Violence and terrorism emerged as the most prominent themes associated with these negative emotions.

Bleich (2020, pp. 1775-1785) examined 139,012 news articles published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* between 1 January 1994 and 31 December 2018. These articles included the terms Africa, African, or Africans within their titles or body text. Of the total, 73,995 (53%) were categorized as negative articles and 65,017 (47%) positive articles. The analysis identified several prominent negative topics, categorized as follows: Conflict 92,025, Disease 29,764, Poverty 27,423, Migration 23,985 Political Problems 20,873.

Conclusion

Statements such as “There have been numerous coup attempts in Africa this year,” “A leader on trial for genocide,” and “Thousands of people who died due to civil war”—which period of African history do they refer to? Fifty years ago, or last year? Or could we hear similar sentences again in ten years?

When discussing Afro-pessimism, it is crucial to clarify which “Africa” is being addressed. It should be remembered that we are referring to a continent composed of 54 countries. Thus, the fundamental question to ask an Afro-pessimist is: “What do you mean by Africa?”. For Afro-pessimists, there is only one country called “Africa”. In this view, “Africa” is treated as a single, homogeneous entity that disregards significant differences in development among failing states, more prosperous states, and other diverse political and economic contexts across the continent.

While the claims of Afro-pessimism are often based on factual data, they rely on a selective use of information. Statistics such as high infant mortality rates, the frequency of coups, or limited internet access are used to demonstrate the continent’s “bad” situation. Indeed, food and water shortages, coups, poverty, and many other problems have persisted in Africa for decades. However, this study argues that addressing Africa’s challenges may first require confronting the pessimistic narratives surrounding the continent. If we acknowledge a persistent pessimism about Africa, an important question emerges: about which continent can we truly be optimistic? As Gilbert and Reynolds (2008, p. 315) point out, “perhaps the next 40 years will be kinder to Africa than were the previous 100”.

It is said that Zeuxis also painted a picture of a child carrying grapes, and when he saw birds flying straight to those grapes, he became angry and said: “I have painted the grapes better than the child, because if I had made (the child) perfect, the birds would have been afraid of him”. (Plinius Secundus, 2024, p. 45). Within the scope of this study, we may ask: Which is Africa? The bird, the grape, the child. If the image of Africa

(grapes) painted by Afro-pessimism were truly “perfect” in its depiction of reality, the birds (other peoples and states of the world) would be afraid.

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributor

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