

## Preface

---

The ideas crystalized in this volume were long in gestation. They started with a course I developed and taught for many years at the University of California, Davis, and later at the University of Oxford: the Politics of Life in Africa. I thank the students in the classes who raised the questions that forced me to think further about some of the issues of quotidian life in Africa.

My first attempt to engage with some of these questions in a book eventuated in the edited volume *The Political Economy of Everyday Life in Africa: Beyond the Margins* (James Currey, 2017). After that book was published, I realized that there are still other questions about everyday life in Africa—particularly in relation to the state and democracy—that I wanted to invite scholars working in different parts of the continent to engage with. When I decided to pursue this a year after *The Political Economy* was published, I found it a bit daunting because of the pressures of the administrative duties I had taken on at Oxford. As the Director of the African Studies Centre at Oxford, I kept postponing developing a concept paper for the book. This went on for about two years. In the end, between “hiding” in my office at St. Antony’s College and coffee stores in the city, I was able to write the initial concept paper in 2019. After contemplating hosting a conference around the central theme of this book and inviting potential contributors, I abandoned the idea of holding one.

I am delighted, though, that many of the contributors were eventually able to present their chapters during the annual conferences of two professional organizations. I co-organized a panel with Katrien Pype at the African Studies Association (US) annual conference (online) in November 2020, where some of the chapters were presented. I thank all those who presented their chapters at the conference, including Pype, Nicholas Rush Smith, Lori Leonard, and Ebenezer Obadare, and the discussant, Victoria Bernal. I thank Bernal for the excellent critique she offered. It was because of this that I invited her to revise and expand her comments as the afterword to the volume. I also co-organized two other panels with Pype during the Association of Social Anthropologists (UK) annual conference (online)

in April 2021. I am grateful to all those who presented their chapters at the conference, including, again, Pype, Eric Trovalla (on behalf of himself and his coauthor, Ulrika Trovalla), Rose Løvgren, Helle Samuelsen, and Rogers Orock. Loes Oudenhuisen of Leiden University, although not a contributor to this volume, also presented a paper during the first panel. I thank all the presenters and our discussant, Richard Werbner, who gave a magisterial response to the papers and raised critical questions for future research.

I thank all the contributors to the volume for their patience and perseverance. They understood my occasional “gentle reminders” as not particularly gentle but still responded gracefully and always with timeliness. I hope the final product is worthy of their individual and collective efforts. Jean and John L. Comaroff are as supportive as ever. I am grateful to them for the preface—written in their trademark ornate prose.

My gratitude also goes to the series editors and our editor at Ohio University Press (OUP), Ricky Huard. Huard is not only very professional but also prompt and courteous in responding to queries. I have never experienced a smoother process of working with an editor at any of the presses I have had the opportunity to engage with in my life in the academy. I am grateful to the others at OUP, Tyler Balli, Beth Pratt, Sally Welch, and Anna Garnai. The copyeditors—Ed Vesneske, Jr., and Kristin Harpster—did an excellent job, for which I am thankful.

Much of the work on this book was completed before I moved from Oxford to the University of Pennsylvania. The Oxford School of Global and Area Studies provided financial support for the book through the Higher Studies Fund. I thank Head of the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, Tim Power, and Head of Administration and Finance, Erin Gordon. I thank my colleagues at the Oxford African Studies Centre, particularly David Pratten and Miles Larmer, and my predecessor as Rhodes Chair, William Beinart. Final editorial work was done in my first few months at UPenn. For their support, I thank my colleagues, particularly Michael Hanchard, Camille Z. Charles, and Department Administrator Carol L. Davis.

I have dedicated this book to my former supervisor, mentor, and friend, John David Yeadon Peel, who passed away on 2 November 2015. I have no doubt that, if he were still here with us, he would—in his inimitable way—have much to say about the various chapters in the book. JDYP was a consummate ethnographer who combined penetrating sociological insight with theoretical sophistication. I hope his spirit is pleased with this *memorial*.

The revised version of this volume was submitted to our editor as the world was getting some relief from the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-2021. Among the many issues raised by the pandemic, there are two that

## *Preface*

are relevant to the theme of the book. The first is that, as a species, we do not have another instrument with the inherent and massive capacity for the protection and preservation of our individual and collective lives other than what we call “the state.” The second is the value (and the limits) of *transparency* central to democratic governance. It was the absence of transparency—especially *ethical or radical transparency*—that, more than any other factor, made it impossible to quickly respond, globally, to the spread of the virus. As to the first factor, it was the nature of the vision, capacity, and sincerity (or otherwise) of those in charge of the state in different parts of the world, particularly in countries with the most advanced scientific capacity, that determined the different kinds of responses that either exposed millions of people to sudden death or saved millions of lives at the earliest possible juncture. For now, and in the foreseeable future, as a species we still *need* and *depend* on the capacity of the state to protect and preserve our individual and collective lives. We also need and depend on the capacity of democratic life to promote and support human flourishing.

*WA*

*Philadelphia, December 2021*