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THE LIGHT ON THE ROAD TO HARARE: HOW DAVID BEACH (PARTIALLY) CONVERTED A BARBARIAN

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I

My first encounter with the late historian David Beach was a non-encounter. I spent most of 1990 and 1991 hoping not to meet him, and by careful planning, I cunningly succeeded in fulfilling this objective. (Albeit with the assistance of the Zimbabwean government, which helpfully closed the University of Zimbabwe during my time there.) It is not that I had heard anything in particular about Beach before arriving. In fact, I was woefully understudied in useful gossip about Zimbabwean scholars. My anxiety about Beach came first from the context of my own graduate studies and second from my anxiety about my own knowledge.

Without naming names, I can say that I had come into conflict early in my graduate work with one of the senior professors in my department. Without going into the gory details, it would be fair to say that the conflict was both regrettable and inevitable, and as much about style as substance. However, one of the substantive issues on which I found myself perennially at loggerheads with this advisor concerned our fundamentally different sensibilities about the social and political obligations and character of the historical profession. Certainly my declared political sensibilities at that point were frequently loud, superficial, and swaggeringly self-righteous, but our disagreement went far deeper than a matter of different ideological loyalties.

This advisor was fond of declaring himself an objective empiricist who approached history without a politics, a scholar who believed that his central responsibility was to pursue intellectual inquiry without suborning that inquiry to any political agenda. In contrast, I was

History in Africa 28 (2001), 333–343.

certain that history was always and inevitably political, that objectivity was a straw man, and that it was neither desirable nor possible to free history of its political character. In some ways, I was less concerned with what ideology a particular historian possessed than that each historian acknowledge that their work was necessarily engaged with the political, and thus strive less to escape that condition and rather to make productive use of it. My frustrations were those described so well by Garry Wills in 1969, in his critique of academic liberalism:

If one is going to have principles or system, it is better to keep them submerged, half-conscious, unadmitted. In fact, one had better not investigate one's basic assumptions at all, for fear of discovering that they are consistent with each other (systematic), "ideological," and therefore ruled out of contemporary discourse on grounds of procedure. Since the liberal's market can work only on hidden premises, hiding one's premises becomes a liberal duty, the price one pays for keeping the [intellectual] market open.¹

II

Beach, by my reading, was the same kind of historian as my advisor. His *The Shona and Zimbabwe* seemed to me just such an empiricist recounting of the precolonial history of Shona-speaking societies.² But just as in the case of the senior professor in my graduate department, it was hard for me to figure out what the "hidden" politics of Beach's work might be out of the text itself. It read as if his claim of disinterestedness was more or less true. The text seemed a fairly straightforward, lengthy, and often remarkably detailed account of the history of various Shona polities, sifting that history into what Beach felt was clearly established, less certain and highly speculative.

Beach didn't even especially claim what I thought he was entitled to claim, namely, that his work was one part of the larger renovation of the precolonial history of African societies, part of providing Africa's independent nations with some kind of usable past. This was, after all, an agenda which many other Africanists that I had read at that point in my studies seemed committed to, scholars like Basil Davidson and Terence Ranger. There was, moreover, the fact that

¹Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes* (New York, 1979), 326.

²David Beach, *The Shona and Zimbabwe, 900-1850* (Gweru, 1980); idem., *The Shona and Their Neighbors* (Oxford, 1994); idem., *A Zimbabwean Past: Shona Dynastic History and Oral Traditions* (Gweru, 1994).

Beach was clearly a Rhodesian, something that I had convinced myself must be *a priori* suspicious. African scholars who had done work following on Beach, like S.I.G. Mudenge and H.H.K. Bhila, seemed to be contesting many of the details of Beach's work. I simply assumed that the historiographical debate over these highly particularistic issues was a mere veneer for some deeper struggle—and I knew that I presumptively should be on the side of Mudenge and Bhila.

So I was afraid to meet with Beach because I didn't particularly want to fight the kind of battles that I was already weary of in a context where I was somewhat unsure of the players on the board and the stakes involved. To be honest, a far more profound fear on my part was simply that I felt completely inadequate to discussing the history of Zimbabwe with anyone who knew much about it, let alone a scholar with the credentials and deep knowledge of Beach. In my mind's eye, he was a stoop-shouldered hermit with piercing eyes and a grey beard down to his toes who would see right to the heart of my historiographical ignorance and my boundless linguistic incompetence in seconds and thunderously order me to depart immediately to study some other African nation's history.

After somehow avoiding this fate, completing my dissertation, and developing it into a book manuscript, I was surprised to find that I had somehow acquired the reputation among certain Africanists of being a notorious "postmodernist." This turns out to be a remarkably easy label to acquire in the field: some scholars use it as a synonym for "scholar-I-disagree with," while for others, evidently it requires no more than a mere mention of any French intellectual of a more recent vintage than Cardinal Richelieu to warrant the scarlet letter "P."

It certainly puzzled me somewhat, as I was not certain what the term meant in any context, let alone whether I was one or not. Attitudinally, I can see where a certain amount of this charge came from, because I did rather relish the role (and still do, to some extent) of rattling the cages of certain senior Africanists about the interested character of all historical knowledge about Africa, and my basis for doing so was increasingly less Marxist (e.g., judging scholars by the extent of their commitment to a particular program of action and critique) and more premised on the kinds of arguments made by Michel Foucault about the interrelationship between power, knowledge, and institutions. In this respect, I really was one of the pomo barbarians at the gates, howling at the guardians on the watchtowers.

Beach came into this picture now less as a sort of imaginary *Döppelgänger* for my former advisor, and more as someone that I could (in my own mind) caricature as one of those guardian figures.

The common knock against Beach among the young Turk scholars who wrote about southern African history, was that he had no theory, that his work was nothing more than details assembled with no guiding purpose or underlying interpretation—a view that was expressed in book reviews of his work from time to time, especially his general overview *The Shona and Their Neighbors*. The fact that I had little aptitude for, and no more than a dutiful interest in, precolonial Zimbabwe prior to 1850 helped make this superficial reading of Beach possible.

This all changed as a result of my actual encounter with David Beach at a time when I was also rethinking at least some of the ways in which I approached historical scholarship. Beach had been invited to a conference on oral history and oral tradition hosted in Bellagio. Part of the invitation also included a follow-up meeting in the United States. In between the two meetings, the conference organizers were hoping to arrange speaking engagements for some of the attendees. I was asked to host Beach at Swarthmore College, where I had been teaching for several years. With some anxiety, I took the plunge.

Those who knew David Beach will already know that my imaginary vision of his long beard and severe manner was hilariously wrong. Beach was gregarious, interestingly eccentric, and remarkably open about his work and his interests. Far from being a stern Old Testament figure who condemned his younger colleagues from a great distance, I found that he had a desperate, hungry interest in what I and every other junior historian of southern Africa thought of his work. While I had been anxious about what he would think of me and others like me, he apparently had been just as anxious about what we all thought of him. He was also classically Rhodesian in his manner, and odd as it may seem, I sincerely mean that as a compliment. We usually, unsurprisingly, think of the essential attribute of Rhodesian culture as being racism, but Beach was basically free of this legacy, while still possessing some of the same wilful and often admirable iconoclasm, stubbornness, and determination common to many ex-Rhodesians.

III

So from this point on, I was forced by circumstance and desire to look at David Beach's work with a fresh eye, in sympathetic dialogue with the author himself. His words, whether on the printed page or in conversation, have forced for me a much more sweeping reappraisal of my own responsibilities and character as a historian, and opened up

for me a much more methodologically pluralist conception of the discipline.

My early readings of Beach had not really been in error. Beach consciously rejected theory and pursued an extremely straightforward kind of empiricism. There was, in fact, a kind of innocence about his commitment to the craft of history, which he saw as following the lead of Jan Vansina, David Henige, George Brooks, and others that Beach admired enormously. These are historians who focused intensively on methodology, and have engaged in running battles with a wide variety of opponents on such issues for the whole of their careers. Their assertions about methodology are deliberate, deeply theorized, and based on fully conceptualized epistemologies which they have aspired to make normative practice for historians working in Africa.

Beach, in contrast, largely understood methodology as a kind of technical common sense. The goal was simple: describe the history of Shona-speaking peoples and neighboring societies with as much clarity, detail, and precision as possible. Any tools which came to hand—whether it was oral tradition, colonial documents, archeological data, or linguistic evidence—were grist for the mill. Certainly he thought a historian could continue to perfect techniques for collecting, interpreting, and archiving such data, and that historians of good will could nevertheless disagree somewhat about the exact shape of these techniques. All the epistemological hysteria about colonial discourse or oral testimony that has so occupied the attention of North American academics frankly bewildered Beach. He simply didn't see the point.

I think it was his very innocence on this score that ultimately made me so sympathetic to his work and his style of pursuing historical scholarship. When I first got to know him, I kept looking for a hidden motive. I don't think I ever saw it. I think it was never there in the first place. Beach was instead a master craftsman who approached historical knowledge as a straightforwardly cumulative process, an encyclopedist who had a comprehensive vision of the history of a particular region and who doggedly set about filling in a complete picture as steadily and evenly as he could manage. In the process, he was dedicated to correcting and amplifying his own research: his *A Zimbabwean Past* was primarily designed for that purpose.

Beach was not a naive positivist who believed that the raw truth of the past simply flowed through him onto the printed page. He always acknowledged that the historian's most vital and most central task was that of interpretation, and he knew that interpretation was al-

ways a contestable enterprise. However, his interpretations and theories were always drawn out of the intimate and particular details of Shona history, even when he was addressing larger issues like the status of oral evidence. He could be animated in describing the usefulness of oral testimony gathered from *svikiro*, Shona spirit mediums, and a thousand similar concerns, but only rarely did he frame these discussions in comparative terms, even within Africa, and then with clear hesitation.

The loss of David Beach, then, is clearly a blow to historians studying Zimbabwe or southern Africa more generally. At the time of his death, he was busily gathering material for a projected two-volume *magnum opus* on the history of the Zimbabwe Plateau and surrounding areas, one volume entitled *Rivers* and the other volume entitled *Mountains*, a project which rather reminded me of the work of the French *Annales* school in its heyday, though without the Marxism of many of its practitioners. The loss of this work alone is a significant loss to my field of specialty and to Africanist historiography in general.

I know that in my own current project on three Shona chiefs, I am heavily dependent on the work done by Beach. There are questions that I cannot answer now that I frankly counted on him to answer for me. In one chapter, I am trying to discuss what I see as “deep languages” governing the use of conspiracy and assassination in Shona politics, making connections between the long-term histories of the chieftancies I am examining and more contemporary struggles. I have both modest historiographical arguments to make in this chapter and some more theoretical ones as well. When I shared the outline of this chapter with Beach some eight months before he became ill, he first pointed me to any number of resources (including his own work) and then commented that the easiest way to figure out whether I was right was to simply do a comprehensive inventory of incidents of conspiracy and assassination in the oral traditions of each Shona chiefship and compare this inventory with a count of less dramatic incidents of succession.

Only David Beach could have viewed this as an easy task. I do not have the ability, or to be honest, the patience to do this, but it was Beach’s gift, now denied us, to approach issues with this kind of profound and enlightening simplicity. His other observation was equally enlightening, and reflected his command of Shona history: he launched into a fifteen minute disquisition of the difference between Shona theories of political life, which he thought could be described with precision, and the rather different and far more variable practice

of political life—and then commonsensically noted that this is pretty much a distinction which we find in all human societies.

I think the loss of Beach also underscores deeper absences and silences which are steadily growing more ominous. For one, now that the scales have fallen from my eyes, I think that the kind of artisanal skill that Beach stood for is in some danger of being lost. Don't get me wrong; I think that many historians of my generation have become extraordinarily skilled hermeneuts. Our technical and epistemological abilities for reading documents are far more subtle, far-reaching, and productive than our predecessors. Many of us are also very skilled ethnographers, including our language skills (though I am not among this number; my most crippling intellectual weakness is my inability to date to learn a second language). What I think perhaps is slipping from the repertoire of North American and British Africanists is the kind of steady, accumulative attention to fine details that Beach stood for.

Some of this is a question of temperament. Personally, I am something of a slash-and-burn, attention-deficit disorder scholar easily distracted by a new theory or by a seductive rendering of the Big Picture. I cannot be the kind of historian that Beach was, and I do not think I would want to be. This is fine, except that within the North American academy at least, our institutional reward structure is now largely oriented towards the theorist, the synthesizer, the scholar with the flashy theory and the new idea, and away from the steady, hard, unglamorous work of laying down the evidentiary and interpretative foundation that all other history requires. Everyone writing on southern African history needs David Beach, but virtually no one wants to be him. So at the very least, I would like to suggest that we have a small but important crisis of values in the historical profession, at least in North America—because this problem applies to all fields, not just African history.

Another of Beach's virtues that we could all learn from, one of the virtues of straightforward empiricism, is that he (and it) does not make a fetish-object out of the alterity of Africans. For the past fifteen years, Africanist historiography, influenced by postcolonial theory and writings about "colonial discourse," has become increasingly obsessed with the difficulty—some would say epistemological impossibility—of understanding African societies, especially precolonial African societies, in their own terms. As more and more Africanist scholars become convinced that the subaltern does not speak, or at least speaks only after extraordinary interpretative contortions by historians, the field itself becomes increasingly arcane and static, as well as

frustratingly self-referential, as more historians are forced to preface their analysis with a long prologue in which they give themselves permission to go about the business of interpreting African history. Africanist historians like to complain about their isolation from the wider discipline, but I think we ourselves have always been the principal cause of this isolation.

Beach's approach to the history of Shona societies cuts through this Gordian knot; while he took very seriously his obligations to understand Shona micropolitics and culture in the terms that various Shona societies past and present understood themselves, he also did not dither and posture about his capacity to do so. Shona peoples, he assumed, were like any other human beings in the world. Their history might be hard to study for technical reasons, but not epistemological ones. I think there are some serious intellectual costs to refusing to see how technical problems are also always epistemological ones, but I also think that we desperately need historians who will counteract the *angst*-ridden tendencies in our field with an amiably straightforward kind of empiricism.

Another concern that the loss of David Beach raises for me is that the study of precolonial African history is heading for a serious demographic crisis. We are all aware that fewer and fewer graduate students are choosing to do work in this field, particularly on pre-1800 societies. Small wonder, as this is just about the hardest kind of historical research that one could imagine. Anyone in this field needs to read and understand scholarship in archeology, linguistics, anthropology, and history.

More importantly, it is a specialization which almost demands the kind of attention to detail and particularity that Beach's work exemplified. Thomas McCaskie's argument about the historiography of precolonial Asante, that it is data-rich but theory-poor, needs to be listened to, but if it is so, then Asante is the exception, not the rule. I am not certain why precolonial African history is being abandoned to such an extent. It is not that the junior cohort lacks either the will or skill to do this kind of work. Some of the issues I have discussed already are certainly a factor. What I also think is important is the politics of African history, and this brings me to the most difficult issues that Beach's work raises for me.

For those of us writing about the southern African past who have urged a conscious awareness of the interested character of all historical writing, what did our arguments lead to? What still seems to me to be an incontestable and important assertion, that all history has a politics, all history is engaged whether it will or no, somehow became

a demand that history serve as a political tool in service to very particular projects of social transformation. This, to me, is a different sense of the term “politics,” and one that has often impoverished, rather than enriched, the historiography of southern Africa.

In the case of Marxist political projects, the verdict is at least somewhat complex. Like more than a few of my colleagues in the field, I still accept the considerable utility of marxian thought for guiding my analysis, for telling me where to look, what to look for, and how to think about what I find. In retrospect, it is hard to ignore the many analytic shortcomings of the orthodox form of Marxist social history that has prevailed in southern African historiography from the late 1970s. For all its many virtues, this school was also partially responsible for the stark deferral of both precolonial history and anything in the historical experience of the nineteenth century that did not involve industrial capitalism. It also relied on models of social transformation that now seem inaccurately mechanical and teleological. This historiography consigned innumerable important social and cultural practices in African communities and inconvenient social classes within African societies to the gray limbo of perpetually undiscussed unimportance. After an initial burst of serious investigation, it often treated the internal workings of the colonial state and colonial capitalism as thoroughly-known objects, summarizable in a quick paragraph or two at the start of an article or monograph.

Historians working out of this tradition were so often certain of the kind of history that would serve the purpose of mobilizing intellectuals and a larger public behind projects of radical transformation that they saw what they wanted to see. However, the flaws of this kind of deliberately political historiography pale beside work conducted under the sign of nationalism, whose avowed purpose has been to provide new African nations with a usable past. As Ernest Renan famously commented on the relationship between modern nationalism and historical thought, nations must have a past but they must get it wrong.

Here I think the current situation in Zimbabwe is especially instructive. For many years, some historians and social scientists (both inside and outside Zimbabwe) dedicated themselves to supplying the ZANU-PF government with the history which they thought could make a nation. This was a history which took a keen interest in the precolonial era, but often only inasmuch as it could valorize that era. This is a history which looked for sources of unity between different Shona polities and even between Shona-speakers and the Ndebele, and it found them, particularly in the first *chimurenga* of 1896-97.

This is a history which was forever on a desperate scavenger hunt for resistance to colonial rule, and it more than often found that resistance in every gesture, every action, every moment of the twentieth century—and when it could not find it, it consigned those histories which lacked resistance to the margins.

It would be comforting to think that the ZANU-PF leadership went about its business without drawing on this resource, that scholars remained peripheral to the circulation of power. Unfortunately, I don't think this is so. More than a few times, I have heard, albeit in considerably distorted form, the pro-nationalist historiography being quoted back into the Zimbabwean public sphere by state officials, often in service to questionable or even actively reprehensible ends. I don't think that the historical profession can come away from the growing arrogance and autocracy of the post-1979 Zimbabwean state (or other postcolonial African states) with clean hands.

History made to order for a particular politics seems to me to be a dubious business. I am not interested in a politics that is not interested in and responsive to the glorious messiness and ambiguity that all human societies past and present abound in, and I don't think anyone else should be either. Here I think David Beach has much to teach us. It is not, contrary to his protestations, that his work was completely disinterested. No one is that, nor should any of us want to be. Beach's scholarship bridged an era in which the official historical orthodoxy was that Africans had no meaningful history and an era in which the official historical orthodoxy was that all history needed to do service to the goal of making an African nation out of the wreckage of the twentieth century. To more or less reject both demands is an engaged act: there is no avoiding that. Beach denied that he had this purpose in mind when asked, and often did argue that his history was useful for independent Zimbabwe.

The use of his work is not that it came out the way that a nationalist sensibility, especially one custom-built to fit the agenda of ZANU-PF, would demand. When you get into the rich details of his work, especially his exploration of Shona micropolitics, it is hard to see some valorous predetermined march towards the glorious leadership of Robert Mugabe. What you do see is a history that could help Zimbabwean society, or its various components, to understand itself, and you see something more, something that Beach himself did not fully grasp: you see that Beach was a partner in a much larger constellation of efforts by ordinary Zimbabweans to discuss and represent their shared and divergent pasts outside of the narrow, constricting vision of the official nationalist imaginary.

As a politics of history, this vision opens up rather than closes down our intellectual possibilities and recalls us to our disciplinary obligations to that unfashionable, scorned virtue, truth, and the need to speak truth to power. We need not be naive about the consequences and burdens of fidelity to those possibilities, those obligations, and sometimes David Beach was naive. I might be a partially converted barbarian, but even converted barbarians still pursue theory and covet a good barroom brawl about intellectual politics. Pure empiricism, an empiricism which scorns any purpose beyond the accumulation of data, is empty and meaningless. However, a consciousness of the interested character of our work, and our shared responsibility for critique, need not, should not, lead us to the opposite extreme, a kind of mandarin scheming or guilt-ridden obsession with our own importance, our own alleged responsibilities to and for the fate of African societies. David Beach—and the lasting legacy of his work—taught me a lot about how to come to that point. I think he could still teach a lot of us to do so.