

Intellectual and Cultural Life under Conditions of Austerity

Maputo, 4-7 June 2018

Call for Proposals

Historians have long recognized that colonial government in Africa was, as Sara Berry put it, ‘hegemony on a shoestring’. Metropolitan governments seeking to cut costs elevated African authorities to administer their colonies, and under ‘indirect rule’ the administration of justice, the enforcement of law, and the building of infrastructure was largely financed and enacted by Africans. Post-colonial African governments similarly operated under durable constraints. The boom in commodity prices in the 1950s and 60s promoted growth in many places; but by the 1970s price inflation resulted in massive deficits in government budgets and shortfalls in marketplaces. Even as infrastructures collapsed, the ambitions of Africa’s nationalist politicians soared. In the era of developmentalism authorities claimed for the state the task of building the nation. There were extraordinarily ambitious projects—the building of dams in Mozambique and Ghana, the world’s biggest church in the Ivory Coast. In more recent times the role of the state has diminished, and private enterprise—often supported by the state—has taken on the task of development. And yet, as scholars have shown, even the best-financed projects rely to a very large extent on knowledge, expertise, and labor provisioned by Africans, whose contributions are often deliberately devalued and obscured.

In times of enduring constraint, how have African cultural and intellectual institutions worked? How—through what acts of remediation—have university people, playwrights, artists, publishers, journalists and others involved in the curatorship of culture made up the shortfall between infrastructural deficit and political ideology? In this tenth session of the ongoing collaboration between the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research and the African Studies Center of the University of Michigan, a group of scholars will convene in Maputo to explore the infrastructure of intellectual and cultural life in post-colonial Africa. We want to unpack the conditions of austerity and what austerity curtailed and circumscribed. We want to bring to light the often-unacknowledged labor and expertise of African intellectuals, administrators and artists, whose commitments and sense of vocation made academic, governmental, and curatorial institutions work in spite of, at times, crippling financial challenges. We want to understand how universities have been reorganised and redistributed in response to constraint and opportunity. And we would like to focus on institutions like archives, radio stations, research centers, museums, theaters, galleries, newspapers, and laboratories that have worked—outside the university—to define social life, husband resources, and preserve and market cultures.

One thread of this workshop will concern African universities, where the tensions between constraint and ambition are most clearly felt. We’re interested in the strategies that universities in Africa have used to deal with limited state support and enormous population pressure. How have different academic institutions navigated austerity? How have academic institutions themselves been reconfigured and redistributed over time? We particularly welcome and encourage papers that explore the history of research institutions and centers. The Rhodes Livingstone Institute, the East African Institute for Social Research and other units of their kind were founded to generate applied knowledge that was useful for colonial governments. After independence, centers such as the Centro de Estudos Africanos in Maputo

also were established to provide empirical and ideological support to the goals of postcolonial regimes. How, after independence, did these diverse research centers operate? What space was there for dissent? What relationship have these research institutes had to centers of knowledge in the global North? How, in recent times, have research centers been transformed and remade to answer to the demands of consultancy and NGO work? What questions are possible to pursue in times of austerity, and what research programs have been closed off?

Another thread we'd like to follow is the history of art and architecture. In Europe and America galleries, critics and collectors play a key role in generating interest, funding work, cultivating tastes and styles, and setting prices. In many African contexts artists have been obliged to respond to imperatives that are determined outside the aesthetic field. Artists in socialist states have had to operate in tight thematic spaces, composing their work in relation to top-down visions of social order and national identity. In other contexts artists have had to frame their work in relation to the tourist market, and there has been a premium placed on the exotic. In apartheid South Africa Bantu education radically constrained the space and the resources with which African artists could work. But as recent scholarly work has shown, artists found ways of making things beautiful. How, in these and other contexts, has African art taken shape? We're interested here in the conditions of artistic production, in the ingenuity of creative people working in difficult times and places. We're interested also in the work of discernment, in the creation of fashion, in the selective process by which some artists (but not others) have 'made it'. Where—in the absence of ready-made gate-keepers—have canons been defined?

We're interested also in music, cinema, and other performative genres. Through what work—through the intervention of what institutions and economies—have (some) musical and cinematic genres found an audience while others have vanished? What does it take to become a celebrity in a place where recording revenues are scarce and audiences are not wealthy? We'd be interested to learn about the backstage of musicianship, the labor history of performance, the men and women who put on the show. We'd be interested to hear about local film industries, about the ways in which films are financed, about the material work that goes into production. What organizational work does it take to produce musical celebrity?

We're interested in media of all kinds, in the newspapers, radio programs, and academic journals that have often acted as incubators for new forms of cultural production. The 'transistor revolution' of the 1960s put millions of low-priced radios into the hands of African listeners. Radio furnished African governments with a novel means of hailing and addressing their people, all at once. But the infrastructure was always fragile. Technologies that worked in the global north had to be altered and transformed to work in sub-Saharan Africa. And national broadcasters were almost always underfunded and undersupplied with spares. How, in conditions of shortage, did radio broadcasters make the technology work? How have other media technologies—including the Internet—been made operational? What audiences have been hailed, and where have media infrastructures fallen short?

We'd like also to learn about the provisioning of social services and about the people who make government run. If an earlier generation of African leaders promised to provide people with resources that they needed to prosper, latter-day governments have been obliged to rein in expectations and make do with less. How, in post-socialist societies, have government agencies been reorganized to respond to

conditions of austerity? How have the logics of social service provision been recast and redeployed? How have the people who labor in these agencies reframed their vocations? What work--ideological, practical, material--do they do to make up the shortfall between the promises of an older era and the constraints of our current time?

In these and in other registers we encourage colleagues from Mozambique, Michigan, Wits and other institutions to take us into the backstage of cultural and intellectual life: into the mechanics and financing of publishing, performance, convocation, government and art. By focusing on process over content—on the labor entailed in the production of art and ideas, on the financing of public occasions, on the work of curatorship—we hope to populate the intellectual and cultural history of Africa, decenter celebrity of all kinds, and bring hidden travails into sharper view.

Mechanics

The conference will be held on the campus of the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane over the space of four days between 4 and 7 June 2018.

We anticipate that presentations will be offered in several different formats.

- a.) Several panels will be organized around the conference theme. Papers for these panels will be composed in advance and precirculated.
- b.) There will be several ‘flash’ presentations. These are rapid-fire presentations of 15 image-rich slides, with each slide showing for 20 seconds before automatically moving on to the next. This style of presentation is particularly suited to projects that aim to surprise, provoke, evoke, or take a stand.
- c.) There will be two or three plenary sessions, in which speakers will present work that is broadly of interest to conferees. These plenary sessions will also involve discussants who will offer substantive comment and criticism around the main paper.

We invite faculty and post-graduate students in Mozambican and other African universities; from the University of Michigan; and from the University of the Witwatersrand to submit proposals outlining a contribution that they hope to make to the conference. Proposals should

1. Specify the format of presentation that the author wishes to make (i.e. pre-circulated paper presented on a panel; flash presentation; discussant),
2. Lay out the major themes of the author’s contribution in a paragraph, and
3. Describe, in a few sentences, the author’s biography.

Proposals should be submitted in either Portuguese or English to the organizers at <jflorusb@umich.edu> by **10 February 2018**.

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