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Philip J. Havik e Malyn Newitt

In Memoriam Patrick Chabal (1951-2014): An interview with Malyn Newitt (King's College London)

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PHILIP J. HAVIK: When did you first meet Patrick? When he joined King's College as a lecturer in Politics and Modern History of Lusophone Africa in 1984? Or earlier? What was your first impression?

MALYN NEWITT: I did not have any major contact with Patrick until around 1996. Professor Helder Macedo, the Camões Professor of Portuguese at King's College London, had completed the negotiations with a number of Portuguese financial institutions and foundations for the establishment of the Charles Boxer Chair in Portuguese History at King's and the College was 'head hunting' a person to be the first Charles Boxer professor. John Russell-Wood was approached but eventually declined to move from the US to London and Patrick decided that I should be approached.

At the time I was the Deputy Vice Chancellor of Exeter University and Patrick agreed that, if I would accept the chair, I could take it up when I completed my work at Exeter in 1998.

In the mean time I invited Patrick to accompany an Exeter University team that was working on a TEMPUS project in Uzbekistan. Together we travelled to Tashkent with an EU party and took part in various academic meetings and excursions. I have always assumed that this experience of Islam Karimov's tyrannical regime helped refine Patrick's thinking on the subject of 'patrimonialism' and 'neo-patrimonialism'.

Before we left for Tashkent, Patrick asked me what his role would be as he had little knowledge of Central Asian affairs. I replied that his role would be to ask questions, preferably searching and difficult questions – a role I eventually discovered for which he was ideally suited.

PH – Was the lectureship a new position at the time at King's? Did he quickly settle in at the Department of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies?

MN – The lectureship to which Patrick was appointed in 1984 was one of the so-called 'new blood' lectureships, which were being funded in British Universities to provide academic expertise in neglected areas of study. Patrick's post was specifically created to cover the field of Lusophone African literature. He was immediately able to complement the expertise in the department which, at that time, was strongest in classical Portuguese literature.

PH – When he arrived at King's, Patrick who was in the early 30s, had already spent some time doing field research in Lusophone countries in Africa in the 1970s and early 1980s, including Guinea Bissau. I expect he must have brought a new focus to the study of Lusophone Africa at King's, as he did in the field in general?

MN – The department at King's had always been strongly oriented towards the literature and history of metropolitan Portugal and was associated with such renowned scholars as Edgar Prestage, Charles Boxer, Luís de Sousa Rebelo and Helder Macedo. From the start Patrick saw it as his mission to widen the horizons of the department to encompass the whole Portuguese-speaking world. In this he was aided by the appointment, soon after his arrival, of David Treece who was an expert in the literature and music of Brazil. Portugal itself was still only just emerging from the turmoil of its revolution and had scarcely begun to rethink its place in the world and to conceptualise the idea of world-wide Lusophone Community – an idea that only achieved some maturity with the creation of the CPLP in 1996. So Patrick's appointment at King's, and especially his missionary zeal to promote the Lusophone literature of Africa, and later the history of the former Portuguese colonies, was ground breaking not only in academia but also in the wider field of international affairs.

PH – He dedicated his first book to Amílcar Cabral (published in 1983) generally regarded as one of the foremost African thinkers and politicians. Cabral was very important for the shaping of

perspectives on the nation and the state in Africa, which were voiced by the new generation of Africanists at the time; what did Patrick's work add to the thinking in the 1980s on nationalist movements and revolution in Africa?

MN – Patrick's biography of Amílcar Cabral (first published in 1983 with a new edition in 2002) is still the book for which he is most widely known. The biography was published ten years after Cabral's death, at a time when he was still treated as one of the martyrs in the cause of African socialism and independence. Patrick was, indeed, a great admirer of Cabral, as anyone reading the book can easily appreciate, but this biography moved the discussion of Cabral's life on from the kind of uncritical praise that had marked popular works like those of Basil Davidson. Patrick's portrait of Cabral was one of an astute politician, a great organizer and a man who could be disconcertingly ruthless towards those who opposed him. For example, Patrick gave considerable prominence to the purges (murders?) that followed the Cassacá Conference in 1964. He also reassessed Cabral's role as an intellectual, showing that he was not really a Marxist (although borrowing from Marxist thinkers) and that his ideas about the need for Africans to rediscover the trajectory of their history and to combat neo-colonialism were highly derivative. In his view Cabral was a great communicator, not a great original thinker. Patrick also discussed the lack of realism that marked Cabral's attempt to create a union between Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, which came so badly and so rapidly unstuck in 1980.

PH – His main concern was eminently political and his work focused on the state in Africa, which constituted the main thread of his teaching and research. Already in his early publications he demonstrated the need for a critical assessment of the nationalist movements in Lusophone Africa. How much do you think his early experiences with Africa influenced his later work? And how do you look upon his evolution as a thinker on the state and politics in Lusophone Africa and beyond?

MN – Studying the recent history of Guinea-Bissau and Angola was, for Patrick, no end of a lesson. The gap which he perceived between the rhetoric (not least the rhetoric of the leftist commentators in the West) and the reality of what was happening in the countries concerned, undoubtedly stimulated him in his search for a general understanding of what was happening on the African continent as a whole. Although best known for his life of Cabral, Patrick came to have a deep knowledge of Angolan affairs and worked with his student, Nuno Vidal, to produce a searing critique of the regime of Dos Santos and the MPLA. It was the nearest Patrick ever came to abandoning his life-long contention that his mission was to understand and explain, not to pass judgment and say what ought to be done.

Patrick wrote lengthy introductory essays to two collaborative works that he edited, *A History of Postcolonial Lusophone Africa* (2002) and *Angola, the Weight of History* (2007). In these he discussed at length whether the colonial experience of the five Lusophone African states placed them apart from other African countries. He identified a number of possible ways in which this might be the case – the extreme authoritarian nature of Portugal's own regime, the rigidly bureaucratic nature of the Portuguese colonial state, the systematic organization of the economy on the basis of forced labour, the lack of any means whereby the views of the population could be represented, the influence over the *longue durée* of the creole class and the fact that, alone of all the European colonies in Africa the mainland Lusophone states had had to fight for their independence. Taken together, these characteristics might seem to set the former Portuguese colonies apart. However, Patrick went on to argue that, after independence, the former Portuguese colonies, with possible exception of Cape Verde, rapidly settled into a pattern familiar throughout Africa where the state was controlled by neo-patrimonial networks which sought to monopolise and consume (by force if necessary) the resources of the state. The Angola of the MPLA, particularly after the 1977 massacres, differed from other African one party states and militarized regimes only in the extreme extent of its violence and rapacity.

PH – In the ten years it took Patrick to move from lecturer to a full tenure as professor at King's, he became a prolific writer. Indeed, he always appeared to be writing 'another book'. Did he discuss his ongoing research and book projects with his colleagues at King's?

MN – During the seven years that Patrick and I were together in the same department, I only remember one occasion when he gave a formal presentation of his ideas. One of the first things I did on arrival at King's was to revive the graduate research seminar and to get members

of the department to describe their work. Patrick presented the core ideas set out in *Africa Works*, and it was a very memorable occasion as his oral presentations were as lucid as his writing. However, I do not remember Patrick discussing his ideas, in a formal way, on any other occasion and, for some reason, he did not attend, or contribute to, the seminars on African history organized at SOAS. In private, of course, Patrick was always willing to discuss his ideas with colleagues or students, and this was the arena where his influence was most felt.

PH – On a recent visit to King's I noticed how much students enjoyed his classes. How popular was he as a teacher?

MN – Patrick was a very popular teacher who had a reputation for taking immense care over marking student work and responding to their needs. His preferred mode of teaching was the discussion or seminar for which students had to prepare and he avoided giving formal lectures whenever possible. Patrick had a great gift for establishing an intimate rapport with any person with whom he was speaking. This enabled him to respond to the needs of students in a way that other professors were seldom able to do. On the other hand he was very selective in accepting the role of supervisor of postgraduate or doctoral students. He was only willing to act as supervisor for those he found sympathetic to his general view of African affairs. This led to some very fruitful academic partnerships and collaborations, but also to his rejecting some applications.

Patrick taught an undergraduate course at King's called "Themes in the Study of Contemporary Africa". This course was very challenging for many students as it was focused on ideas, interpretations and concepts, not on easily learned narratives and facts. Challenging as it was, this course was highly valued and stimulated the students to produce work beyond their normal capabilities. Sadly Patrick died half way through the academic year and I was recruited (at three days' notice) to fill the gap. I found a student group who were committed, interested and already thoroughly conversant with the central concepts of 'Chabalism'. Only a remarkable teacher could have achieved this at a time when he was already terminally ill.

PH – He also served for more than ten years as Head of the Department of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies. It's common knowledge that such a responsibility – which is often looked upon as a burden – usually requires particular skills, above all a capacity for making tough decisions and sometimes enemies. How in your opinion did he fare in the job?

MN – The Department of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies was very small by contemporary standards and there were never more than ten teachers and 60 or 70 students. In these circumstances Patrick's style as head of department was very informal. Although there were formal departmental meetings and the bureaucratic requirements of the College were met, Patrick preferred to deal with all questions through informal discussion, often on a one to one basis. Many of the responsibilities were devolved to colleagues – for example the organization of student placements in Portugal or Brazil – and the day to day administration was carried on by the departmental secretary. Patrick himself was seldom present in College more than two days a week – a regime that enabled him to maintain his remarkable output of scholarship – but he was one of the few people I have known who would reply to an e-mail usually within minutes of receiving it. Patrick could certainly be ruthless if it was necessary but the goodwill in the department, his trust in his colleagues and his consensual style meant that ruthlessness was seldom required.

PH – Besides a teacher and writer, he was also very active in networks of African Studies. In the early 1990s he was one of the driving forces behind the founding of the AEGIS network, which has since taken on a key role as a forum for African Studies in Europe. How would you rate that achievement?

MN – Patrick's role in AEGIS was one of which he was proud. As a Frenchman, specializing in Lusophone Africa, he always felt he had a mission to broaden the horizons of insular Brits. The study of African affairs, he felt, reflected the old partition of Africa itself. French scholars seldom trespassed into Anglophone Africa, while Anglophone scholars notoriously seldom cast a glance towards Francophone Africa. Both countries vied with each other in their neglect of Lusophone Africa. An organization that would bring together scholars of different academic traditions and make them listen to each other was therefore very important

to Patrick's perception of his academic mission. Patrick also thought that it was important for researchers in the social sciences and humanities to communicate more effectively with each other, and this became one of the central ideas that characterized his writing. AEGIS was to be the forum where cross-disciplinary and cross-national communication would be realized.

PH – He was always a great advocate of an interdisciplinary approach within academia. Indeed, in his own work it is quite clear that he considered inter-disciplinary research an essential part of epistemology and methodology in studying societies and states in Africa, but also at the level of academic cooperation, collaborations and research projects in different countries and academic institutes. Would you agree that his pursuit of these ideas had a profound and lasting impact on African Studies?

MN – Patrick was a tireless exponent of the idea that the frontiers of academic disciplines should be as permeable as the frontiers of so many of the African countries that he studied. All his writings, and not least his last book *The End of Conceit*, are based on the intellectual conviction that the social sciences cannot make any sense of human affairs without studying and understanding culture. In his own writing Patrick moved easily between literature, history and politics and he became the scourge of a certain kind of social scientist who assumed that society could be understood and engineered in disregard of the prevailing culture of its people. To many people reading Patrick's work today this may seem only too obvious and it is easy to forget the degree of academic apartheid that kept the disciplines separate during much of the 1970s and 1980s.

PH – In a recent tribute to his work, some colleagues referred to him as the 'unelected dean of African Studies'? Do you think that compliment accurately reflects his legacy?

MN – No, I think this title is quite inappropriate. Patrick's work is much admired and many Africanists have followed his lead in reassessing almost every aspect of Africa's post-colonial history, but Patrick never aspired to be the sort of 'authority' figure implied by the title of 'dean'. Indeed, any suggestion that his ideas should become a kind of orthodoxy would have appalled him. Patrick was essentially a rebel and an iconoclast, challenging existing orthodoxies not establishing new ones, and his books will always pre-eminently appeal to people who distrust the narratives spun by the 'establishment', whether this is the establishment of the World Bank/IMF or the establishment of African studies departments in academia.

PH – Some of his books like 'Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument' became standard references in African Studies; indeed it is virtually impossible to write an article or chapter on the politics and society in Africa without mentioning his work. But he also, importantly, countered the trend towards 'Afro-pessimism' which is still very popular in and beyond academic circles. His 'Africa: the politics and suffering and smiling' took the issue further by introducing the reader to people's daily lives – rather than the world of the ruling 'elites' which dominates much of the writing on the continent. Would you characterise him as an Afro-optimist who changed people's minds?

MN – *Africa Works*, is undoubtedly Patrick's most influential book. Even today, nearly twenty years after it was first published, it is arresting in its originality and penetration. In this book Patrick (and his co-author Jean-Pascal Daloz) point to the fact that those features of the current state of Africa which are the despair of development economists and welfare NGOs – such as witchcraft beliefs, political corruption, violence, ethnic cleansing, lack of investment, inequality – are all highly rational from an African perspective. It is not that Africans do not behave rationally, it is that their rationality differs from that of the West. And he argues that this African rationality is, at every point, embedded in the prevailing culture of 'patrimonialism' or 'neo-patrimonialism'.

It is no exaggeration to say that *Africa Works* changed fundamentally the way that Africanists had to view their subject. As such it was profoundly unsettling to many people who had invested their whole careers in alternative narratives of African affairs. As Patrick pointed out, up to that time, African studies had been dominated by academics whose careers had been built on endlessly revisiting the evils of colonial rule and who either shied away from looking at the post-colonial chaos on the continent altogether, or who were content to continue, as the decades went by, to blame this on colonial rule or even more remotely on the slave trade. Patrick believed that this approach to African affairs, founded as it was on a sense of

guilt, was profoundly unhelpful because it removed African agency from the equation. For Patrick, Africans were not helpless victims of their past, any more than the Chinese or Indians or Koreans or other people who had suffered from colonial depredations, slavery and forced labour. Instead Africans were very much in control of events and this had to be understood. Violence, underdevelopment, corruption and the rest prevailed because Africans had learned that this paid better than the prescriptions of Western economists.

Patrick once told me that he had been invited by the UK Department for International Development to join a panel of experts to review Britain's development policies in Africa. He had turned down the invitation on the grounds that his mission was not to tell people what to do but to explain to them what was happening in Africa. This is exactly what *Africa Works* does. It explains, it does not offer solutions. Indeed it challenges the whole notion that there can be such things as 'solutions'.

PH – In his last book *'The End of Conceit: Western Rationality After Postcolonialism'* he shifts his gaze to issues that go far beyond the limits of African Studies, producing a broad critique on 'Western' thinking. The very positive reception of the book shows that he was seen to expand upon current thinking on an issue which has been in the forefront of debate in the social sciences since Said's Orientalism. How relevant do you consider his message regarding 'thinking beyond theory' for a reassessment of the 'South'?

MN – *The End of Conceit* is very much the swan song of a great scholar and writer. In it Patrick brings together the main themes of his earlier writings but instead of using them to explain African affairs he employs them in a critique of what he calls "Western rationality". This book, like all his others, is written very lucidly and his arguments are set out clearly, and blessedly without the use of any of the jargon which so often mars academic writing on politics, society and literary criticism. However, it seems to me that this is not a ground-breaking book in the way that so many of his earlier works have been. It can be read with great profit and it is full of interesting ideas and probing questions, but any regular reader of, for example, the *Guardian* newspaper will be familiar with the ethical and policy dilemmas which Patrick identifies as challenging Western rationality. Patrick has in his sights a *certain kind* of Western rationality, and one which he thinks informs the policies of the World Bank and IMF, but whether one can move from this narrow focus to an assumption that there is a single 'Western rationality' that is in crisis is much more doubtful.

There never has been a single 'Western rationality' and it is the very pluralism of Western thought and rationality which has always been the intellectual and cultural strength of the 'West'. Many of the issues Patrick examines at length in the book, for example the adherence of Muslims in the West to the *umma*, are very familiar in European history in the way that Western law and intellectual culture has had to adapt to the belief of Jews and Catholics that they had multiple identities and loyalties. Moreover much of the discussion of the question of individual freedom, which Patrick identifies as critical in the West today, had already exercised thinkers like Mill two hundred years ago.

Patrick has always advocated 'thinking beyond theory' and the necessity to think in cultural terms, but, it seems to me that is what those concerned with human affairs (academics, politicians, writers and, yes, officials of the World Bank) are already doing. *The End of Conceit* will be an influential book not because it is unlocking a closed door but because it is pushing at a door that is already opening.

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