Contemporary African Issues and Debates  
(SPS-P-P01506)

Course convenor  
Dr Thomas Molony

Course outline  
Contemporary African Issues and Debates (CAID) aims to allow students to frame and interrogate a range of contemporary debates using the theories and skills gained in the semester one Theoretical and Conceptual Underpinnings core course. The debates attempt to tackle issues that are common to much of sub-Saharan Africa today. Adhering to the usual caveat about diversity across the continent, the course acknowledges that Africa is an amalgamation of societies. This wide variation makes generalisation difficult, but has not stopped superficial interpretations of Africa, its countries and people—especially in the non-African media. CAID attempts to transcend such views through analysing issues that are commonly discussed in various fora both inside and outside the continent.

Each week students will prepare and lead a seminar on a key contemporary issue relating to Africa. This is with a view to further shaping students’ own thinking and analytical skills, bridging the conceptual focus of semester one with the student-led discipline of the dissertation. In keeping with these aims, the course is non-prescriptive and the topics are not ‘taught’ in a lecture-style presentation before the debate.

Course objectives  
By the end of the course students should have a knowledge and understanding of multiple perspectives of contemporary issues, with specific reference to:

1. Understanding the background and context of selected contemporary issues in Africa.
2. Constructing academic arguments based on secondary research.
3. Understanding the relationships between concepts, theories and critiques of contemporary African issues and developments.

Time  
The course takes place during semester 2 (January-March 2009) in G03 of the William Robertson Building between 1600 and 1800. The first class meets on 13th January 2009. Subsequent meetings will take place at the same time weekly, in the same place, until probably the 24th March session (and no later than 27th March, when teaching ends for the semester). Depending on student numbers, more seminars may have to be scheduled so that every student leads at least one debate.
Preparation
Students will be expected to prepare and debate from one of two opposing perspectives. Each week one student will present from the ‘Yes’ side, another from the ‘No’ side.

All students will be expected to read both the prescribed texts for that week and one additional text that is recommended the week before by each lead debater. These readings are compulsory, and the course convenor reserves the right to deduct marks from students who show signs of having not read the prescribed literature. The readings for each debate will typically amount to around five pieces: one recommended by each of the two lead debaters, and up to three other prescribed texts. To further enliven the debate, students are encouraged to also read additional text of their own choice.

The lead debaters will be expected to read at least two additional articles of their choice. Lead debaters’ articles should be discussed with the course convenor at least a week before they are due to present so that their recommended reading can be passed on to the other students. The student is expected to e-mail the course convenor with his/her readings, and not vice versa. The course convenor also reserves the right to deduct marks from students who do not provide literature at least by the Monday (i.e., eight days) prior to their debate.

The debate motions will be announced at the first meeting. The prescribed reading will be made available for photocopying the week before the debate. At the first meeting students can choose to debate from the following topics:

- Antiretrovirals
- Celebrity (the opening, ‘warm-up’ debate)
- Colonialism and present-day Africa
- Corruption
- Democracy
- ‘Experts’ and NGOs
- ‘Female genital mutilation’
- Language
- Peacekeeping
- Biotech
- Debt-relief
- Gender
- Sexual promiscuity and HIV/AIDS
- Structural adjustment

Format
The convenor will open the debate with a brief introduction and will only intervene to keep the debate on track.

The ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ lead debaters then both present for at least 15 minutes each (to a maximum of 18 minutes). This time limit is based on the time allowed on most
conference panels and will be strictly enforced. Presenters are encouraged to prepare, practice and time their presentations in advance. Often the best presenters use only notes and avoid reading verbatim from their script. PowerPoint presentations are permissible but are not mandatory. Please let the convenor know in advance if you require a data projector for the class.

Following the lead debaters’ presentations there will be an open discussion. This should be based on the presentations and is a chance for students to advance the debate with points from their thoughts on the additional literature. Given the contentious nature of some of the debates, it is recognised that students will sometimes have to defend a side that does not always reflect their personal opinion. This both provides a challenge and is a useful discipline because it provides an opportunity to gain exposure to – and perhaps be to be won over by – a new view. Please critique the ideas presented, not the presenter!

Students – and not necessarily the lead debaters – will be asked to sum up each side of the debate for a couple of minutes. The debate will close with a final vote and note will be made of how, if at all, opinions have changed since the opening vote!

**Background reading**
The following literature is a small mixture of popular pieces and ‘classics’ that may help to frame where some of the debates.


Teferra, D. 2004. 'Striving at the Periphery, Craving for the Centre: The realm of African scholarly communication in the digital age'. Journal of Scholarly Publishing. 35 (4)


There are many important sources beyond the academic literature. The Mail & Guardian (South Africa) and The East African weekly newspapers provide useful commentary on their respective regional developments. Africa Confidential is a punchy, albeit brief, newsletter summarising the latest politics.

Much background on a country can be gained from the annual and quarterly reports of The Economist Intelligence Unit. A former Africa editor of The Economist is Robert Guest, whose 2004 The Shackled Continent: Africa's past, present and future (London: Macmillan) was read by many students prior to the last couple of times the course has been run, and raised much debate in itself. Guest launches a scathing attack on the London-based New African, a magazine that tends to take a post-colonialist and strongly anti-imperialist stance in its editorials and articles. It has a history of downplaying criticisms of controversial African heads of state (see Guest’s section on the New African’s attempts to defend Charles Taylor, for example), and commonly calls for pan-African unity. African Business magazine is published by the same company. Both present opinions written by African journalists, many of whom are based in the diaspora.

Novels by African writers can be a great commentary on much that affects peoples’ lives in Africa (see Nyamnjoh 2004, above, on their importance). You will probably be familiar with classics by the likes of Achebe and Wa Thiong’o. One of the most recent, by the latter, is the weighty Wizard of the Crow.

The internet, of course, is a useful starting point, and blogs are an increasingly common site for dissenting voices to make themselves heard. As with all sources, however, please remember to cite in full anything you use from the internet, indicating the URL and date you downloaded it. It is not a weakness to cite other people’s opinions; indeed as a researcher it is a strength (when the sources are relevant) to show that you are casting your net wide and being innovative in your attempt to provide a forceful argument. The weakness is if you fail to acknowledge these sources when you use them to add to your own argument.
Assessment
The debates themselves will not be formally assessed. Course assessment will be by an essay of 4,000 words. The essay will be based on one of the seminars where students have taken a lead in researching and presenting preliminary arguments on particular issues.

Students benefit more from CAID when everybody pulls their weight and participates fully. Attendance at every debate is compulsory, and students who are unable to attend any debate should inform the convenor in advance—this is essential for lead debaters. The course convenor also reserves the right to deduct marks from students who do not regularly attend debates.

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