

# Macalester International

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Volume 14 *Complex Contradictions: African, American, and Middle Eastern Perspectives*

Article 7

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Spring 2004

## Editor's Note

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### Recommended Citation

(2004) "Editor's Note," *Macalester International*: Vol. 14, Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol14/iss1/7>

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Contemporary history is, quintessentially and schematically, a combination of durable elements of the past, the Brandelian *longue durée*, and immediate happenings. However, a mating of heavy structure and time now does not guarantee the recovery of all that is seminal nor the equal impact of all events. In the former, despite enabling skills that are now available to dig deep into eons gone by, the insight gained is still only a fraction of the vast mysteries that surround it. In the case of an immediate occurrence, the repercussion may sediment into our consciousness to shape both memory and the engagement with the contentious present. Conversely, an episode, albeit brilliant, may in the end prove to be like a “firefly,” with hardly any lasting consequences.

The present, then, is the imminent force of a history in motion. As a terrain of live encounters, it epitomizes numerous and complex contradictions—those, for example, between contending concurrencies and, inevitably, tied to diverse visions of, and implications for, the future. Complexity in this sense connotes a thickness of intersections and entanglements. Contradiction, on the other hand, conjures up the coexistence of sharp divergences, if not colliding modalities. Since all contradictions are not of equal significance, how to separate the major from the slight is contingent upon the peculiarities of the milieu and the choices made by engaged actors. For humankind, therefore, making history seems to be at once linked to degrees of freedom set by the nature of, or better, within the limits of inheritance from the past and the raging battles over the present. In other words, human living is simultaneously determined and open. In a continuously ricocheting expression of one thinker, Karl Marx:

Men [and women] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, Marx's drift, in the balance between the incubus of then and now, seems toward the potency of the given and the relatively weaker audacity of agency. But it is also reasonable to suggest that he had, in the final moment, some confidence in the constructivist capacity of human beings. Here, Marx's intimating undercurrent of the pos-

sibility of a drastically different future than the order he so incomparably anatomized — a perspective that had inspired (and still moves) many to reform, if not transform, their circumstances — is part of our common sense.

In brief, the perpetual drama of women/men caught in conditions that carry with them the encumbrances of the past yet present opportunities, even if only fleetingly, is in progress in every hamlet, country, and zone of the world. This was the pre-analytic frame of our conversations.

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The 2003 International Roundtable identifies the Middle East, Africa, and the United States as three locations where both dense complexities and confounding contradictions are to be found.

We start the discussion with **Rashid Khalidi's** discerning reflections on the history and fate of democratic aspirations in the Middle East, and the problematic presence of the West (particularly the United States) in the region.

**Ngugi wa Thiong'o** brings forth the costly interplay of globalization, African identities, and local languages. His is an unflinching defense of primordial cultural assets (i.e., languages) of the continent. **Emily Parker** questions some of Ngugi's assumptions and posits, among others, that "linguistic salvation" may not be an effective recipe to treat the acute vulnerabilities (local/global) of the peoples of Africa. **David Chioni Moore's** intervention articulates an agreement with Ngugi on a number of points, particularly the continuing economic pressures on Africa from the global capitalist order and the fragile context of African vernacular languages. However, Moore doubts what he senses as Ngugi's implied connection between the preservation of local languages and the "resolution of Africa's economic problems."

The final conversation is centered around **Philip Bobbitt's** distinct meditation on "terrorism" and the rising shift from the epoch of the nation-state to that of the "market state." In his formulation of a fundamental change in historical and political order, Bobbitt concludes with an intriguing proposition for the United States: To win the "war on terrorism" and competently play its leadership role, the United States must create viable coalitions as well as successfully take on "humanitarian crises." **Michael Okrob** acknowledges Bobbitt's novel contributions. Nonetheless, he points to what he deems to be a crucial silence in

the essay — the bewildering question of identity in the ostensibly advancing constitutional order embodied in the market state. Further, Okrob is skeptical of the premise that the attributes of the market state will become the “framework for the vast majority of states.” **Philip Geier’s** contribution takes note of Bobbitt’s remarkable capacity to “think big,” an intellectual talent that aids us in understanding the evolution of the constitutional structures of modern history. Geier, however, stresses that an effective American position in the world ultimately depends on a mixture of intelligent thinking and diplomatic style that build on multilateralist strategies, rather than a crude unilateralism that is bound to enervate its legitimacy, leadership, and influence.

This dialogue continues into the theme of the 2004 Macalester International Roundtable—“America and Global Power: Empire or...?”

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### **Note**

1. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” *Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, Inc., 1980), p. 97.