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Minabere Ibelema

Cultural Chauvinism: Intercultural Communication and the Politics of Superiority. New York: Routledge, 2021. 154 pp. £44.99 (Hardcover). ISBN: 9780367710026.

Reviewed by: Jan Nederveen Pieterse , University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, USA
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Cultural chauvinism, according to Ibelema, “is the tendency of peoples of the world to think of themselves as superior to others and therefore more valuable.” The book’s pivot according to the author is “the notion of Western values” as “the most consequential expression of cultural chauvinism.” This is familiar terrain with a vast literature on Eurocentrism and American bias, and a formidable career that has been summed up as “from Plato to NATO.”

Minabere Ibelema grew up among the Ijaw people of the eastern Niger Delta, obtained his PhD at Ohio State University and became a professor of communication at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. His book *The African Press, Civic Cynicism, and Democracy* (2008) won the US Society of Professional Journalists’ Award for Research in Journalism.

Chapters in the book examine western values from the perspective of nonwesterners, look at nonwesterners’ cultural chauvinism, discuss contestations over democracy, homosexuality (not accepted in much of Africa and the Islamic world) and other values. One chapter sketches a history of cultural chauvinism, particularly in terms of European Renaissance, the Enlightenment and colonialism while another chapter offers counterpoints of African and Africanist scholars, such as Negritude, Afrocentrism, and “Black Athena” disputes.

The book’s focus on press and journalism with direct quotes from political leaders offers a refresher course on contemporary prejudice. The database of news reports provides prejudice from the horse’s mouth, a database with more bite than political economy, development studies, sociology and cultural studies accounts, but not more profound. The book is written in a light, conversational style, an easy read. Cultural chauvinism is perennial and omnipresent and the book roams wide.

According to “Western press coverage of other peoples,” “All things nefarious are non-Western” (chapter 4). Corruption, too, is typically nonwestern. Ibelema scans Transparency International’s Index of Perception of Corruption and finds that several western countries (France, USA, and Italy) score lower than many nonwestern

countries (p. 35). Ibelema draws on Reporters Without Borders (or RSF, the French acronym) to document the United States' steady decline in press freedom: "When the RSF index was first released in October 2002, the United States was ranked 17 among the 139 countries measured. By 2005, however, it had plummeted to 44th out of 167 countries. And in 2019 it was further down at 48th out of 180 countries" (p. 69). In this way, Ibelema debunks many American press clichés. Ibelema also notes changes in reporting over time:

By the 1990s, such a stark contrast between Europhilic civility and African barbarism had eased somewhat. Even the Hutu-led pogrom against the Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994 was covered with less emphasis on primordial tendency and more on political rivalry. The shift became more pronounced in the coverage of Kenya's post-election bloodshed in 2008, the Darfur crisis, and the protracted civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (p. 42).

An eye opener is seeing "western values" through the lens of nonwesterners, which brings up several themes. The book's multicentric take on chauvinism features sections on Nigeria ("Nigeria's press is free, except when it isn't"), the Biafra civil war, Rwanda (the Kagame doctrine), the Congo. On press freedom, Ibelema notes that at issue is not just Trump and Berlusconi but also Buhari and Kagame. The material on Africa often has depth and detail while sections on China, India ("press freedom at 'Internet shut-down capital'"), Europe, the Balkans, the Islamic world, Japan draw on assorted news reports and at times echo American perspectives.

Ibelema hails from southeast Nigeria. He quotes Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, the Emir of Kano: "If you look at the poverty indices in the world today, you find that in South-West Nigeria, the incidence of poverty is 20 percent. In the North West, it is 80 percent. The North-East, it is 80 percent. Why is it that the poorest parts of this country are the Muslim parts?" (p. 123).

Gradually limitations emerge. The umbrella category "western values" and the consistent use of the terms western and nonwestern show American bias ("western" means Americans are not alone; exceptionalism and indispensable mean America leads). As Ibelema observes, it is a cold war ideology. ("The very idea of Western culture in its contemporary usage is said to have evolved during the years after World War II. It was the beginning of the Cold War between the communist 'East' and the democratic 'West.' 'In the chill of battle, [the West] forged a grand Plato-to-NATO narrative about Athenian democracy, the Magna Carta, the Copernican Revolution, and so on'" (p. 21)).

Much discourse that Ibelema describes as western is rather American, or Atlantic, with the United Kingdom. The portmanteau does not quite fit continental Europe, which is historically more connected and where some media have experienced an earlier decolonization. The portmanteau "western" obscures marked differences between the United States and United Kingdom (corporate-led economies) and the European Union (social market economies and emphasis on international law in foreign relations). The "rules-based international order" involves different rules; the

American approach, for instance in the World Trade Organisation, taboos “nonmarket behavior” while in Europe industrial policy is standard and common sense.

In the concluding chapters, Ibelema anticipates “political convergence” on liberal democracy and democratic values, in the vein of enlightenment thinking and Fukuyama. In his view, “The most powerful engine of convergence today is globalization” and Islamism is the main countercurrent, “the last real challenge to ‘the end of history’” (p. 124). This implies a narrow angle on globalization (which is diverse and convergence is not a necessary horizon) and probably also on Islam. So, after many forays in “nonwestern countries,” it is “western” thinking that steers Ibelema’s way.