

Interview – Priya Lal

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of our Black History Month features. The interviews speak to the fundamental aims of Black History Month and discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for young scholars.

Priya Lal is an Associate Professor of History at Boston College. Her first book, *African Socialism in Tanzania: Between the Village and the World*, tells the story of Tanzania's *ujamaa* socialist experiment of the 1960s and 70s. She is currently writing a book entitled *Human Resources* about the training, labor, and circulation of educational and medical professionals in and beyond Southeastern Africa since independence.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

African history is a big and somewhat fragmented field, but in the last fifteen years it has seen an explosion of scholarship on the decolonization and postcolonial eras. With this have come a few welcome thematic and methodological trends. One is toward exploring Africa's transnational or global connections, especially to the African diaspora, the Global South, the socialist world, and international organizations and institutions. Another trend is toward urban history, and there is also an important emerging cluster of scholarship around the history of science and technology.

But I think the most interesting current debate in the field is still implicit; it deals with the limits of the African nation-building project. By this I mean less the internal failures of postcolonial African states than their inability to escape from global structures of power. Historians of Africa are long past the point of triumphalist narratives of African independence, but we haven't yet adequately addressed the persistence and even intensification of global inequality after decolonization. Older concepts like neocolonialism and analytical frameworks like world-systems theory tried to reckon with this issue, but we need new approaches. I hope to see more research on African political economy and state policy in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s that engages with new transnational histories of neoliberalism. There are also many cultural and social histories of popular experiences of economic hardship or decline that remain to be written for this era. Given the contemporary pressures of climate change on the continent, I also hope to see more scholarship on African environmental history attuned to themes of political power and social transformation. It's important to pay attention to the continent's many histories, but I think these specific areas of inquiry will better equip us to make sense of the present.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Big question! I've been preoccupied with the fact of global inequality in one way or another since I was quite young. I had a very privileged childhood in material terms, but my parents came from a part of the world with crushing levels of poverty, and that affected me deeply. Growing up relatively near the U.S.-Mexico border, that marker and maker of hemispheric disparities, was also formative for me. In college, I sought explanations for why some parts of the world were so much poorer than others, and ways to correct this injustice. Reading a bit of Walter Rodney and Frantz Fanon showed me the value of thinking about these questions historically. Before I began graduate school, I spent some time working for local rural development organizations in India and South America. These experiences taught me a lot about the limits of conventional development interventions, which seemed so futile in the face of

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colonialism's crippling legacies and the monstrous structures of global capitalism.

When I got to graduate school, I was especially inspired by anthropologist James Ferguson's scholarship on southern Africa – both his critique of the international development regime as an “anti-politics machine” and his ethnographic study of Zambian mineworkers' experiences of economic decline. In a search for political alternatives, I was also taken by the writing of many African leaders and activists of the decolonization era. Two who stand out are Steve Biko and Julius Nyerere. I still admire the clarity and elegance with which they connect abstract concepts like colonialism and capitalism to the relatable realm of everyday human experiences, relationships, and ethics. My first book and my current book focus on African national development projects, including Nyerere's own, out of a desire to better understand what transformational possibilities existed at the moment of African independence and what happened to them in practice. I still care about these issues, but these days I'm also reading and thinking a lot about climate change, a subject that is fundamentally altering how I see the world. The fact that our species has set into motion such destructive planetary forces that exceed our control is unsettling some of my core assumptions about the potential for human progress in the present and the recent past. I've already completed most of the research for a third book on nature and education in the decolonization era that will hopefully help me think through some of this more carefully.

How do the aims of Black History Month speak to your field/discipline? What can be done to forge a more equal discipline?

In the U.S., we celebrate Black History Month in February. In the spirit of this tradition and the Black Lives Matter movement, there has been a lot of discussion of race and power in academic circles here lately. Among leftists there is something of a consensus about the need to “decolonize” the study and writing of history, but it's not always clear what that means. Symbolic acts like removing statues of slaveowners from college campuses, institutional initiatives to hire more professors of color, and the revision of standard curricula to highlight the historical experiences of black people have been important areas of emphasis.

But unfortunately these reforms do nothing to address the most obvious problem of my field: the fact that scholars based in North American and European institutions have close to a monopoly on the production of and access to contemporary knowledge about Africa's past. A lot of my colleagues seem resigned to this obscene reality, but it's a bit absurd to speak of intellectual decolonization without taking it on. The key is finding an effective point of intervention. Historians like me don't have much control over the material conditions of knowledge *production* on the African continent, where many universities face long-standing institutional challenges that make it difficult for their staff and students to sustain active research and publication agendas. But scholars based in the West do have the power to intervene in the realm of African *access* to knowledge, by finding alternatives to the profit-driven academic publishing industry to circulate our work. Normalizing open-access publication would greatly benefit African readers, many of whom can't afford expensive books and database subscriptions. It wouldn't cost us a lot, and it would force a rethinking of some arbitrary professional norms that are probably long overdue for questioning anyway.

The subtitle of your book *African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania* is “Between the Village and the World”. Can you explain this phrase, and how the Tanzanian *ujamaa* project fits into it?

Thank you for this question! I wanted “Between the Village and the World” to be the book's main title, but my publisher thought it was not literal (i.e. marketable) enough. The phrase has several meanings. First, it captures the internal logic of Tanzania's *ujamaa* experiment of the 1960s and 70s, which sought to resettle the country's rural population into socialist villages that would form a radical template for new sorts of political community at the national, continental, and even global scales. Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere believed that socialist development should begin with a process of subjective transformation, a remaking of personal practices and social norms on a small scale, rather than a state-enforced program of mass industrialization. At its most ambitious, *ujamaa* villagization aimed to cultivate a socialist ethos among rural Tanzanians that could ultimately change the world. Second, the phrase reflects my desire to depict the rural subjects of my fieldwork, people usually rendered as actors on a minor “local” side stage of history, as figures engaged with ideas and institutions and processes that we usually think of as “global”: socialism, capitalist markets, the Cold War. Put simply, I tried to de-provincialize the Tanzanian

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village and place it at the center of twentieth-century world history. Third, “Between the Village and the World” plays with theories of historical geography that emphasize how certain spatial categories can reinforce prevailing power dynamics by naturalizing or concealing them. One of these categories is the unit of the nation-state, which I deliberately sought to bypass or disaggregate from the inside and the outside. Hence, the Tanzanian nation is simply one of a range of spaces “between” the local and the global.

How do you think scholarly work on African socialisms contributes to a more multifaceted history of global socialism?

When I started working on my first book, there was very little scholarship that took African socialism seriously as a political project. Most scholars implicitly dismissed it as a poor copy of Soviet-style socialism, an absurd fantasy doomed to failure, or a crude rhetorical cover for sinister power grabs by postcolonial leaders. By contrast, I found the writings of some of African socialism’s main architects to be fascinating works of political theory with a distinctive set of shared themes and a unique underlying logic. When examining how their policies played out in different national cases, too, I identified common patterns making up a previously overlooked continental repertoire of African socialism. I hope that by highlighting this repertoire and paying close attention to its content and effects, I have helped open up a story of mid-to-late twentieth-century politics that escapes the blinding but oddly persistent binary frameworks of the Cold War. There were many socialisms, and we are only starting to understand some of them.

Can you tell us a bit about the book on postcolonial development and professional labour you are currently working on?

My book starts with a question: how does a newly independent country build a welfare state when, due to colonial underdevelopment, it has hardly any citizens qualified to staff its institutions? I examine how the governments of Tanzania and Zambia navigated this dilemma with regard to professional manpower in the spheres of education and medicine. The book begins with 1960s state efforts to train an entire workforce of African professors and doctors on a limited budget and in a compressed timeframe, in both local and foreign institutions. I then follow these professionals into the new national universities and teaching hospitals where many of them would spend their careers. The rest of the book explores the difficult working conditions they faced – involving acute resource shortages, institutional breakdown, and tensions with state authorities that worsened in the late 1970s and 80s – and their efforts to serve the public, maintain their professional integrity, and meet their own basic needs in the face of these challenges. Throughout the study, I show how the effort to staff African welfare states was a transnational production, involving money and people and knowledge from across the world. I also argue that these national projects were ultimately undermined by global dynamics that drove local economic decline, fostered devastating rates of professional emigration, and promoted a destructive politics of austerity.

How does your historical work on national development in Southeastern Africa challenge existing narratives of development and progress?

I’m almost halfway through a draft of the book, but I’m reluctant to answer this question until I’ve written the whole thing, because I’m still working out its interventions as I go! For now, I can say that my book underscores the centrality of the human resource question to the fate of African national development projects. It’s very odd how this point has evaded significant scholarly attention. In the 1960s, socialist planners and development economists alike were obsessed with the issue of skilled manpower: they thought that building and supporting an African professional workforce was an imperative condition of economic growth and popular welfare. In the 1970s, this belief began to wane, and by the 1980s cost-cutting and economic efficiency had replaced social investment as the overriding priority of most policymakers. Today, the human resource question is still as urgent as ever, but we have very little good scholarship with which to make sense of it. We have still fewer studies that try to approach this topic from the perspective of African professionals themselves, as my book does. This scholarly blind spot has profound contemporary implications. For instance, without an adequate understanding of the historical roots of African medical labor shortages and the mixed effects of past efforts to correct them, we can’t grasp why the health care systems of many African countries are so poorly equipped to deal with the current COVID-19 pandemic.

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What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

Perhaps because I've spent so much time studying academic labor, I'm reluctant to dispense traditional professionalization advice. A lot of senior scholars with successful careers like to tell junior scholars or students that they should read a certain type of book, or write a certain type of dissertation, or pursue a certain path to publication. If the younger scholars simply follow these instructions, the myth goes, they'll end up just like the successful senior scholar: with a comfortable tenured job and the freedom to spend their life pursuing exciting intellectual projects. However, the truth is that – at least in the U.S. – the academic job market is completely broken. Brilliant scholars doing extraordinary work are grinding themselves into the ground competing for fewer and increasingly exploitative teaching contracts. Given this, I urge younger scholars to be wary of anyone who believes that academia is a meritocracy and who gives advice based on that assumption. I'd rather direct my own suggestions, as presumptuous as this may be, to my tenured peers and more well-established colleagues. If we want to support younger scholars, we need to pay attention to the conditions in which they work and our role in sustaining them. We need to ask uncomfortable questions about why universities resist efforts at graduate student unionization, why growing ranks of adjunct professors are paid poverty wages while tuition rates skyrocket, and why so many of us cling to the myth of a functional system of academic training and hiring in the face of all this. And then we need to do something about these problems.