

# BOOK REVIEW

**Peter Schraeder, ed. *Understanding Contemporary Africa*.** Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2020. xvi + 479 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$35.00. Paper. ISBN 9781626378940.

The first edition of *Understanding Contemporary Africa* appeared in 1992 under the editorship of sociologist April Gordon and political scientist Donald Gordon. As editor of the new, sixth edition Peter Schraeder notes, the continued success of the previous editions is the result of a combination of factors: the book's "broad scope that covers all regions of the African continent," its readability, and its interdisciplinarity (xv). In updating the content for the new edition, Schraeder has stayed true to the teacherly principles that underlay the Gordons' original intentions for *Understanding Contemporary Africa* as a comprehensive, classroom-friendly textbook ideal for introductory courses in African Studies (2). Indeed, with 14 chapters ranging in length from 15 to just over 50 pages, the book lends itself very easily to 15-week US semesters, allowing instructors, whatever their own disciplinary expertise, to cover everything from basic history and geography to issues of kinship, religion, public health, ecology, and attitudes to LGBTQ+ rights.

Schraeder explains that the book's overarching goal is to "take stock of the socioeconomic and political-military events and challenges that continue to affect and transform" the continent (1). The expectation that readers of this book are most likely to be US students (8) determines its Africa-for-outsiders perspective, starting from the basic necessity to define the continent as comprising 54 countries and demonstrating its physical size in relation to the size of the US. In defending the "continental perspective" (4) of the book, Schraeder points to the centuries-old history of trans-Saharan trade, the significance of North African nationalist successes in the 1950s as a vanguard of anti-colonial nationalism south of the Sahara, and the rise of Islamist and pan-Islamist movements in predominantly Muslim countries in all regions (5). These examples not only support the continental perspective, of course, but also illustrate how the book essentially hews to the tripartite periodization of African history into pre-colonial, colonial, and independence eras.

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To bolster the aim to be as thorough and wide-ranging as possible, chapters obviously have to be highly selective, and most open with fairly standard disclaimers about the difficulty of generalizing. Garth Myers's chapter on environmental challenges, for example, warns readers that "any sentence that contains the phrase 'Africa is ...' ought to automatically be given an asterisk" (239). Coping with this conundrum is not easy, and balancing the need to strike general themes while reminding readers of the continent's massive diversity can never be completely satisfactory. However, given the space constraints, it is fair to say that all the authors in *Understanding Contemporary Africa* manage the problem as effectively as possible. Jeffrey Paller's chapter on population and urbanization, for instance, sets up a general typology of African cities and the problems they face and then proceeds to illustrate those types by brief and effective descriptions of individual cities. Besides, all of the chapters include good, up-to-date bibliographies that will allow interested readers to go deeper should they wish.

Changes from the fifth edition include entirely new chapters on public health and LGBTQ+ rights, and new authors of chapters on politics (editor Schraeder himself), economics and development (Michael Kevane), population and urbanization (Jeffrey W. Paller), environmental challenges (Garth A. Myers), family and kinship (Barbara G. Hoffman), and the roles of women (Gretchen Bauer). In addition to providing the book's introduction and its future-oriented conclusion, Schraeder has replaced Donald Gordon as the author of the chapter on politics, revised his chapter on international relations, and collaborated with Ambrose Moyo on a revised chapter on religion. Those three chapters are the longest in the book, so Schraeder has definitely made this new edition his own.

The one chapter from previous editions that has been removed had provided an overview of African literature. While it may be argued that literature would have no greater claim to a chapter than any other of the art-forms, especially music or the visual arts, literature does give us a sense of what lived experience *feels* like. Instructors using *Understanding Contemporary Africa* in US classrooms will probably wish to supplement the welter of information provided by this textbook with additional texts that convey some of that individual experience (another very efficient Lynne Rienner anthology *Writing African Lives* might serve that purpose). For future editions, though, I would suggest that an additional chapter on African popular culture would be in order. In the meantime, *Understanding Contemporary Africa* remains an extremely valuable and usable introductory textbook for the American classroom.

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