YJIA Podcast
A Conversation with Daniel Magaziner

By Alex Defroand and Nelly Mecklenburg

In October 2016, the Yale Journal for International Affairs launched its inaugural podcast series. We spoke with Howard Dean, former governor of Vermont and presidential candidate, about the U.S. election; Stephen Roach, former chair of Morgan Stanley Asia, about the future of work; Emma Sky, former advisor to the Commanding General of U.S. Forces in Iraq, about the shifting geopolitical order; and philosopher and political scientist Seyla Benhabib about the refugee crisis.

In our fourth episode, historian Daniel Magaziner reflected on contemporary politics in South Africa, Rwanda, and the withdrawal of several African governments from the International Criminal Court. Below are two abridged excerpts from this conversation. The episode was hosted by Alex Defroand and Nelly Mecklenburg.

Daniel Magaziner:
The first question speaks to this idea that human rights is some sort of universally-accepted norm that is applied equally and equitably. We have to get rid of that. Human rights only apply in certain places at certain times. They tend to be applied as a matter of doctrine and policing where states are weakest. African states have been weaker than other states across the world over the last fifty years. They have seen their ability to project and maintain sovereignty within their territorial boundaries undermined because of the nature of the construction of the states in the colonial period and the nature of the post-1973 economic crisis.

Human rights is seen as continuous with forms of colonial exploitation as many African peoples experience it. The language of human rights emerged in the late-eighteenth century as a matter of doctrine and policing where states are weakest. African states have been weaker than other states across the world over the last fifty years. They have seen their ability to project and maintain sovereignty within their territorial boundaries undermined because of the nature of the construction of the states in the colonial period and the nature of the post-1973 economic crisis.

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Alex Defroand:
You mentioned the announcement by the Zuma government in South Africa to leave the International Criminal Court (ICC). This comes after Burundi and the Gambia already made that step, and other countries are hinting at leaving too: Uganda, Kenya, for example. They claim that the ICC is biased against them. How fair do you think this accusation is? And secondly, with South Africa specifically, the Mandela government was pivotal to the establishment of the ICC. What does this shift by the Zuma government say about the legacies of Mandela?

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INTERVIEW

DM: How has the idea of Africa changed in the public imagination?

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One of the most striking changes of the last half decade or so in South Africa has been a reappraisal of Nelson Mandela and his legacy. A younger generation of activists within South Africa are much more critical of the things he did and that he stood for. Foreign policy is a very small part of this. The Mandela era is remembered around the world as a golden age; people don’t see it quite so nostalgically on the ground.

Nelly Mecklenburg: You’re on the editorial board of [the blog] Africa Is A Country whose title plays with this image that the African continent is one unit and we can talk about it as one entity. Since you’ve been in the field for twenty-some years, how has the idea of Africa changed in the public imagination?

DM: Africa Is A Country is directed not just at the Africa of the imagination but the Africa of public media discourse. It was founded in the late 2000s as a space to intervene against public perceptions that Africa was one place and all Africans act in certain ways. We have moved on from that. We no longer spend a lot of time addressing every time someone makes some gross generalizations. That battle has been won, or at least there are now other battles to be fought.

There are certain things that we have had to combat constantly. For example, the common perception of ‘Africa Rising’, this idea that in the early 2000s, the economic indicators were going up, democracy was going up. People said, “Oh look, Africa is good now.” So a lot of the issues that continued to dog the continent— in terms of treatment to women, ‘sexual minorities’, general kleptocracy— people started looking away from those.

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Centuries as part of the widespread movement toward the abolition of slavery. Where this gets complicated is that the necessity of abolishing slavery became part of the justifications for imperialism across the African continent. Africans know this. They know human rights were used to justify limitations on sovereignty.

To the specific case of South Africa, it hurts to see this government withdraw from the ICC. It hurts not because I’m a great fan of the ICC, not because I think it’s fair or functional, but because I see in that a rejection of the idea that the international community has something to say about what happens within sovereign states. And in South Africa, it was the international community that kept the African National Congress (ANC) alive during its exile.

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Now, people say that Africa is not rising. You have people like Jeffrey Gettleman in the New York Times saying Africa is a continent in flames, in protest, a continent of repression. The fact of the matter is Africa as a whole was never rising or falling. Some African countries were doing well, some were not.

Instead, we try to show what is happening in dynamic African cities, what is happening with culture, who are the cultural producers, what is the fashion scene like. This is something that is now being picked up elsewhere. Others are starting to catch up with the notion that these are places of enormous complexity and they defy generalization.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE


ENDNOTES