Introduction

To witness kith and kin dying of poverty is the worst humiliation. We are at our weakest, at our most powerless and vulnerable, when we cannot help those for whom we care attain the food, water, and shelter necessary for survival. There is a sense of injustice and of abject failure when children perish from malnutrition and disease, or when the old, the sick, and the innocent are left behind on roads and paths leading away from epochal violence and crisis.

A global epidemic of violence and poverty marks the contemporary world. Formal wars between nation-states have declined, but civil conflict, sectarian bloodletting, and other forms of violence have been increasing, from suicide bombing and narco-terrorism to rape as an instrument of war. At the beginning of the new millennium, more than forty-five armed conflicts were being waged, many of them in Africa, where some wars have been grinding on for four decades or more.[1] More generally, the past two centuries have witnessed violence that is so nearly unimaginable that it has strained our very capacity to describe and understand a world in which so many have died.

We also inhabit a planet of extraordinary poverty and inequality. Across large swaths of the world, the gap between the "haves" and "have nots" has grown precipitously. More people currently live lives of poverty and destitution than at any other point in human history.

Poverty, particularly extreme poverty, often is closely associated with violence, whether in the form of large-scale war or in the petty tyrannies

[1] Stephen C. Lubkemann, *Culture in Chaos: An Anthropology of the Social Condition of War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1.

exercised by the powerful over the weak. Concerned social scientists are beginning to understand the relationship between violence and economic development in the contemporary moment, for example, the economic consequences of peoples displaced by conflict. We know less about the long-term relationship between violence and economic change, which is the major concern of this work.[2]

The great majority of the desperately poor live in the developing world that in the nineteenth century had been European colonies and today are the home of some 84 percent of the planet's more than 5.6 billion people. Most of the poor live in rural areas. Three billion people attempt to live on two dollars or less per day; 1.3 billion people attempt to survive on one dollar a day, the World Bank's rather arbitrary cut off separating abject poverty from outright destitution. Inequality has grown to levels never before imagined or experienced. In 1999, the combined wealth of the richest three people exceeded the GDP of the poorest forty-eight countries. The income distance between rich and poor countries has widened, from a factor of 3 to 1 in 1820 to 74 to 1 in 1997: the top 20 percent of people in the richest countries earned seventy-four times the income of the lowest 20 percent in the poorest countries.[3]

In 2000 alone, some 1.7 million children died from inadequate food or health care, twice the number of those slaughtered in the Rwandan genocide. Every day more than twenty thousand people die from extreme poverty.[4] One scholar has estimated that there is a death from hunger and hunger-related diseases every 3.6 seconds. More than 800 million

[2] See, for example, Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and his *Breaking the Conflict Trap* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Giblin notes the ways in which people today connect contemporary vulnerability to a deeper history located in a history of war and colonial violence. See James L. Giblin, *A History of the Excluded: Making Family a Refuge from State in Twentieth-Century Tanzania* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), esp. 23–54.

[3] Economic growth in countries such as Brazil, China, and India alter worldwide patterns of poverty and inequality. For a popular discussion of global trends, see *The Economist* 22–8 Jan. 2011.

[4] The figures change so rapidly one hazards to write them down. "Thousands Died in Africa Yesterday," *New York Times*, editorial, 27 February 2005. The editorial referenced Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005). For statistical material, see *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Anup Shah, Globalissues.org, available from *http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Facts.asp* (accessed 5 May 2008). See also Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006); Stanley L. Engerman and Kenneth L. Sokoloff, "Colonialism, Inequality, and Long-Run Paths of Development," in Banerjee, Benabou and Mookherjee, eds., *Understanding Poverty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

people suffer from insufficient food and nutrition.[5] Add to this the wars, civil conflicts, and lawlessness that reign in large areas of the world and the descriptor *apocalyptic* seems not too much of an exaggeration. We are still trying to answer the challenge Walter Benjamin posed over a half century ago amidst Europe's devastations: how to produce a history of the "state of emergency" that "is not the exception but the rule" within which so many live and die.[6]

Africa is the world's poorest continent.[7] Here, domestic food production continues to slump, conflicts grind on, populations and especially cities grow, and the specter of famine looms in the countryside. Millions of people have been displaced by violence. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimates there are more than 11.6 million displaced people in twenty-one Africa countries.[8] Malnutrition is exceptionally widespread. In a number of areas, particularly southern Africa, which is experiencing a horrific HIV/AIDS crisis, life expectancy has declined. Expert opinion estimates that across large areas of the continent people are not expected to live past their fortieth year.[9]

These lamentable facts contrast with an era of economic growth in the late colonial and early post-colonial eras. Over a broader span of time, they also contrast with the historical experience of Western Europe and the United States. Comparatively, life expectancy in large parts of contemporary southern Africa is roughly the same as in the United States over a century and a half ago, before the miracles of modern medicine and the extraordinary advances in human nutrition and the food supply. Since 1850, for example, life expectancy in the United States has increased from forty-three to over seventy-six years, a remarkable achievement and part of a greater "escape from hunger and premature death," as the economist Robert Fogel put it.[10]

[5] James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

[6] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968). See also Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[7] For one attempt at understanding poverty in Africa, see John Iliffe, *The African Poor: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[8] *http://www.internal-displacement.org* (accessed 1 Dec. 2010).

[9] *World Development Report 2000/2001*; Helen Epstein, "Time of Indifference," *New York Review of Books*, 12 April 2001.

[10] Robert William Fogel, *The Escape from Hunger and Premature Death, 1700–2100: Europe, America, and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Many governments and institutions have expended enormous energy and funds addressing poverty and inequality. Humanitarian organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and The Carter Center have addressed issues such as malaria and other parasitical infections, soil erosion, and high-protein yet drought-resistant crops. It seems as if every month a university in the United States and in Europe announces the creation of an "institute" or "center" focused on poverty and development in the poorer areas of the world. Columbia University's Earth Institute has targeted the entire globe, its director Jeffrey Sachs (an advisor to the United Nations) declaring to the world a point-by-point plan to end poverty.[11] At nearly the same time, the World Bank all but publicly stated that past and current explanatory models simply have failed.[12] There is, in short, increasing concern with world poverty and a consensus that it is time to fundamentally rethink its causes.

Historians have been noticeably absent in most of these discussions. There is not, for example, a single historian on the Earth Institute's board, or are there any historically based research projects at this and at most other institutes aimed at addressing contemporary global problems. In the development studies arena, where complex issues often are reduced to technical problems, a decade seems a very long time ago and a century ancient history. A historical sensibility, an attention to long-term processes and to the particularities of place and time, can appear to many as quaint and, at worse, rather irrelevant, the historian's penchant for the idiographic an irritant to social science's nomological aspirations.

Generally speaking, much of the historical discipline has been remarkably silent on the issue of poverty. For a whole host of reasons the study of poverty largely waned as a generation of historians focused their energies on cultural questions. Instead of issues such as poverty or inequality that had been at the very center of the social historical revolution, topics such as identity and imagined communities garnered far more attention. This is not without paradox. Historians explored subjects such as representation and identity at a time when millions perished from disease and lack of food and wars racked much of the world. They pursued cultural questions at the very moment their erstwhile subjects were, quite

[11] Sachs, *The End of Poverty* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

[12] Independent Evaluation Group, The World Bank, *Annual Review of Development Effectiveness, 2006* (Washington, D.C., 2006). See also Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard, eds., *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

literally, vanishing from the face of the earth. As an eminent historian recently noted, "The currently dominant forms of cultural history are not capable of grasping the historical transformation of world capitalism (and I would add violence) that is powerfully altering social relations in our own era."[13]

This is perhaps less the case within African history, where it has been rather more difficult to avoid issues such as poverty and inequality; although here, as well, cultural history powerfully shaped the sorts of questions scholars have asked. Frederick Cooper produced a chart demonstrating the meteoric rise in the use of words such as "identity" and "globalization" and the relative stasis of vocabularies that had anchored histories of colonialism. A.G. Hopkins recently asked, "What has happened to the study of Africa's economic history?" Hopkins noted that during the 1970s, studying Africa's economic past "was thought to be essential to understanding the long run causes of underdevelopment." Today the field "seems to have died . . . from . . . neglect."[14]

Certainly, once upon a time political economy occupied the center of an Africanist social history. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, historians focused their attentions on topics such as class formation and rural poverty, development and underdevelopment, and more generally on Africa's position within a capitalist world economy.[15] As with social history more generally, a deep ethical commitment informed this work of recuperation. Social historians scoured the past to bring people out "from the enormous condescension of posterity," in E.P. Thompson's memorable words.[16] Exemplary histories might be discovered in the gritty details of those who struggled, suffered, and so often prematurely died.

[13] William H. Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 18.

[14] A.G. Hopkins, "The New Economic History of Africa," *Journal of African History*, 50 (2009): 155–77, 155. See also Barbara Weinstein, "Developing Inequality," *American Historical Review* 113 (February 2008): 1–18; Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), esp. 2–58. Part of Cooper's critique is to historicize the production of knowledge and particularly the ways certain conceptual languages come to be deployed. What is offered beyond the critique and beyond the study of empire is not always clear. See Prasenjit Duara, "To Think Like an Empire," *History and Theory* 46 (May 2007): 292–8. See also Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

[15] See Frederick Cooper, "Africa and the World Economy," *African Studies Review* 24 (1981): 1–86.

[16] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966), 12.

Africanist historians were also among the most powerful voices arguing against models of development and economic change that presumed an Africa somehow isolated from capitalist modernity or trapped within an unrelenting tradition. An earlier literature had located Africans within discrete ethnic groups, represented most famously in Murdock's map of Africa. From the 1970s, a new generation of scholars repopulated the continent with peasants and farmers, migrant workers, prostitutes, and beer brewers – people whose lives had been shaped by local, regional, and global networks of production and consumption, work and labor, and the circulation of globalized commodities.[17]

This was especially the case in southern Africa and particularly in South Africa. Historians offered powerful narratives of the agrarian past, exploitation, and the gut-wrenching poverty within those areas that would become apartheid's homelands.[18] Before the 1970s, a good deal of historical writing on South Africa had been organized around static conceptions of ethnicity or tribe, ahistorical ideas of race, and, in some cases, rather simplistic conceptions of historical process in which rural areas were poor because they were not modern.[19] By the end of the 1980s and the final years of apartheid rule, a remarkable literature had emerged around capitalist development as *the* formative motor of historical change, the organizing trope of South African history.[20]

[17] Hundreds of books and articles were published just on the subject of the African peasant. For an overview of early developments, see Frederick Cooper, "Africa and the World Economy," *African Studies Review* 24 (1981): 1–86. More recently, see A.G. Hopkins, "The New Economic History of Africa," *Journal of African History* 50 (2009): 155–77.

[18] For examples, see Colin Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (London: Heinemann, 1979); reprint, London: James Currey, 1988; William Beinart and Colin Bundy, *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa: Politics and Popular Movements in the Transkei and Eastern Cape, 1890–1930* (London: James Currey, 1987); Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons, eds., *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1977). For a recent, penetrating critique of the radical school, see André Du Toit, "The Owl of Minerva and the Ironic Fate of the Progressive Praxis of Radical Historiography in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *History and Theory* 49 (May 2010): 266–80. Du Toit observes how much of the most interesting work on South African history is being written outside of the country, particularly in the United States.

[19] For a classic critique of the "liberal school," see Anthony Atmore and N. Westlake, "A Liberal Dilemma: A Critique of the Oxford History of South Africa," *Race* 14, 2 (1972): 107–36. See also Martin Legassick, "The Frontier Tradition in Southern African Historiography," in Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore, eds., *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London: Longman, 1980).

[20] Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone, eds., *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa* (London: Longman, 1982). For a later example see, for instance, Robert Turrell, *Capital and Labour on the Kimberley Diamond Fields, 1871–1890* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

South African historical writing generally followed trends set elsewhere: European, especially British, labor history; the new economic anthropology; and world systems analysis. A corpus of work privileged the study of capital and class, part of a larger "social turn" in the interpretive social sciences. Beginning in the late 1980s and accelerating in the next decade, however, the history of political economy generally began fading from view.[21] The 1990s saw a wave of studies in which culture and language, colonial encounters and discourses, moved toward the center of research and writing. Critiquing more than two decades of historical work and insisting on the centrality of culture and postmodernist insights, in 1991 two influential historical anthropologists baldly asserted that "colonization was everywhere more than merely a process of political economy."[22] This trend of focusing on subjects such as identity, memory, and the production of history largely continues.[23]

Very few historians of South Africa became "postmodernists," however one defines the term. There is considerable breadth in the ways they have thought about culture. Much of this scholarship has enriched the historical understanding of South Africa by troubling categories scholars once assumed as given or unproblematic, questioning the telos of historical models whereby Africans inevitably became wage laborers or city dwellers, or by offering alternative ways of thinking about the political imagination unfettered by the narrative of official nationalism or

[21] For a useful overview, see Sewell, *Logics of History*.

[22] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 2: 16. See also Clifton Crais, "South Africa and the Pitfalls of Postmodernism," *South African Historical Journal* 31 (1994): 274–9.

[23] See, for example, Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Paul S. Landau *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). My own work has sought various ways of exploring the boundaries and bridges between social history and cultural approaches informed by post-structuralism. See, for example, *White Supremacy and Black Resistance in Pre-Industrial South Africa: The Making of the Colonial Order in the Eastern Cape, 1770–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), and *The Politics of Evil: Magic, State Power, and the Political Imagination in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Exceptions to the cultural turn and interest in the politics of identity can be seen in the work of environmental historians. See, for example, Nancy J. Jacobs, *Environment, Power, and Injustice: A South African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Jacob A Tropp, *Natures of Colonial Change: Environmental Relations in the Making of the Transkei* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006). Generally, British based scholars have been rather less attracted to post-structuralism, whereas the American academy has been much more influenced by the works of thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida. See Sewell, *Logics of History*, for a helpful survey of the historical profession.

resistance to the state.[24] For reasons that have yet to be systematically analyzed, cultural history (including the study of identity) has been one of the few "growth" areas of historical writing inside the country. An interest in creating a "useable past" for a "post"-apartheid South Africa, and a pervasive politics of identity, has largely supplanted earlier concerns with the history of political economy. Historians, for example, have devoted considerable effort to public history, especially what is discussed as "heritage." They have participated in the restoration of Robben Island and its conversion into a tourist site, the creation of the District Six and other museums, and an array of public history projects. What they have done far less is to explore the history of poverty and inequality, perhaps because these issues have implications for how one understands the governing African National Congress (ANC) and how it has addressed – or failed to address – the country's economic and social challenges.[25]

One goal of this book is to reawaken interest in topics that may seem to those within the cultural turn to be decidedly old hat and uninteresting – topics such as warfare, crop history, and colonial policy – but hopefully to do so in unexpected ways. In returning to the historical study of the economy, my intent is not to go back to earlier schemas such as modernization theory with its teleology of tradition to modernity; or neoclassical economics, where scholars often see the market as a historical actor that determines social relations; or Marxist approaches centered on incorporation, modes of production, and underdevelopment.[26] One of the possibilities offered by the cultural turn has been to raise questions around accepted models of explanation and process – especially structure, human agency, and social transformation – inviting us to see the world slightly differently by posing new kinds of questions about the past and present. How do we think about the archive, its creation, and its organization? How have models of explanation obscured or suppressed engagement with other ways of understanding the past, other ways of being in the world? What is the "social life" of things, and how might

[24] Landau, *Popular Politics*; James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); Crais, *The Politics of Evil*.

[25] For an emblematic work on public history, see, for example, Leslie Witz, *Apartheid's Festival: Contesting South Africa's National Pasts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003). See also Premesh Lalu, *The Deaths of Hintsa: Postapartheid South Africa and the Shape of Recurring Pasts* (Johannesburg: HSRC Press, 2009). Recent meetings of the South African Historical Association have privileged topics such as public history and memory.

[26] Hopkins, for example, seems to want to resurrect an earlier historiography through a plea for "revival." Hopkins, "New Economic History of Africa."

such an understanding complicate the ways we think about value?[27] The linguistic turn brought into question materialist conceptions of historical process but begged the question about how scholars might analyze the gritty aspects of human existence. Understanding these aspects, especially the bare conditions of life, is this work's principal challenge.

I focus especially on two processes at the center of modern imperialism and the contemporary world: the prosecution of violence and the creation of new patterns of systemic poverty and inequality.[28] How might the story of rural poverty in South Africa "look" if we bring the problem of violence toward the center of its analysis? To what extent was violence both destructive and formative, or constitutive, of new and durable social and economic patterns?

South African history offers particularly rich possibilities for exploring these issues, and especially the problems of poverty and insecurity in the modern world. Contemporary South Africa has one of the largest, if not the largest, gaps separating the poor from the wealthy.[29] It also has very high levels of poverty. Since South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, both inequality and poverty have risen. The poverty problem presents acute challenges to the government and raises a whole host of issues ranging from the delivery of basic services to the durability of South Africa's young democracy. The Eastern Province, the site of the former *Bantustans* of the Ciskei and the Transkei, is the country's most impoverished region. Roughly one-quarter of the country's poor live here. Over half the population is unemployed; disease, malnutrition and infant death remain stubbornly high; and some 30 percent of the

[27] Arjun Appadurai, eds., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Appadurai argues, pp. 8–9, that Marx's distinction between use-value and exchange-value was trapped in a "mid-nineteenth century episteme" that "could see the economy only in reference to the problematics of production (Baudrillard 1975); the other regarded the movement to commodity production as evolutionary, unidirectional, and historical." His approach to the commodity disengages it from production specifically and, more generally, from capitalism itself. In short, Appadurai has historicized what had been formulaic. Although these points may seem esoteric, they have shaped the ways historians have discussed African agency and consciousness.

[28] Both are hard to quantify; this book cannot meet the empirical rigor and the complex model building demanded of much social science. Data on topics such as income, consumption, and wage rates simply are not available, or at least not consistently available, until well into the twentieth century. Military leaders rarely tallied enemy deaths or the destruction of property or attempted to describe what might have been the long-term consequences of military action. It is left to the scholar to pick through history's detritus trying to make connections among disparate information.

[29] Frances Wilson and Mamphela Ramphele, *Uprooting Poverty* (New York: Norton, 1989), 16–8.

population is HIV positive but without adequate access to medical care.[30] The Eastern Cape not only is the poorest region in South Africa but among the poorest areas anywhere in the contemporary world. In 1998, the Eastern Cape had the highest infant mortality rate and the second highest fertility rate in the country; the correlation of mortality and fertility, as we shall see, is typical of other impoverished regions of the world. In terms of the Human Development Index (HDI), which measures socioeconomic development on the basis of life expectancy, income, and education, the African population falls squarely within the data for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. The rural areas of the Eastern Cape thus are not unlike Zambia or Malawi, two of the poorest countries in the world.[31]

The study of South Africa raises acute questions around the categories of historical analysis; about knowledge of place, time, and social process; how we envision the local; and how historians attempt to reconstruct the everyday. Historians have spilt some venom and rather more ink on the question of South African "exceptionalism." There is much that distinguishes South Africa's history from the history of the rest of the continent. South Africa produces nearly as much electricity as the rest of Africa south of the Sahara combined. Its economic infrastructure is similarly advanced. It experienced a massive and rapid industrial revolution, whereas much of Africa remains dependent on the export of agricultural products. Moreover, of course, South Africa experienced a degree of white settlement unique in the history of colonial Africa. These and other historical facts have tended to produce a historiography in which South Africa is seen as somehow fundamentally *sui generis*. At the same time, scholars working on other parts of Africa have stopped at the Limpopo River, reinforcing the view of South Africa as separate from the rest of the continent.[32]

[30] See Wilson and Ramphele, *Uprooting Poverty*; Julian May, ed., *Poverty and Inequality in South Africa: Summary Report prepared for the Office of the Executive Deputy President and the InterMinisterial Committee for Poverty and Inequality* (Durban: Praxis Publishing, 1998). In this work, I will be using Eastern Cape and Eastern Cape Province synonymously.

[31] Material taken from *South African Survey 2001/2002*, produced by the South African Institute of Race Relations (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 2001).

[32] Some of the most widely read books on rural change in Africa, for example, contain no discussion of South Africa. For example, Sara Berry, *No Condition is Permanent: The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993). For a discussion of South African exceptionalism, see Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).