

Review Essay

Mazrui and His Critics

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This work is a review essay of two books: *Africanity Redefined: Collected Essays of Ali A. Mazrui*, edited by Ali Alamin Mazrui, Ricardo Rene Laremont, Tracia Leacock Seghatolislami, Michael A. Toler, and Fouad Kalouche (Africa World Press: 2002) and *Governance and Leadership: Debating the African Condition: Ali Mazrui and His Critics*, edited by Alamin M. Mazrui and Willy Mutunga (Africa World Press: 2003) These are the first two volumes in a three-volume work dealing with the correspondence among Ali Mazrui and his opponents, as well as his supporters, on issues relating to Africa.

Mazrui, a Kenyan scholar, is currently Albert Schweitzer professor in humanities and director of the Institute of Global Cultural Studies, Binghamton University, State University of New York. An Oxford scholar, he is also Albert Luthuli professor-at-large in humanities and development studies at the University of Jos, Nigeria, as well as Andrew D. White professor-at-large emeritus and senior scholar in Africana studies at Cornell University (www.islamonline.net). In addition, he has authored many publications and television and radio documentaries. Perhaps his best-known work in the West is his BBC radio and television documentary series "The Africans," which was co-produced by the BBC and the public television station WETA.

Writing on Mazrui, Sulayman Nyang of Howard University states:

Ali Mazrui is a controversial but independent and original thinker. He is a master word-monger and certainly does not belong to that class of men who lament that words fail them. ...It is because of his conjurer's ability to negotiate between the realm of serious issues and the province of

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provocative words and concepts, that divide his readers between those who take him seriously, and those who take him lightly.¹

Africanity Redefined

Making a similar point in the opening chapter of the first volume, co-editor Alamin Mazrui, associate professor of Africana Studies at Ohio State University and nephew of Ali Mazrui, describes Mazrui's writings as a double-edge sword that cuts across every political divide, be it social, ideological, gender, racial, political, or religious (pp. 5-16). Such controversial stands have drawn many critics, as well as admirers, to his work. In fact, the strong opinions held by both his opponents and his supporters is what gave birth to these two volumes. Is Mazrui an independent thinker, or does he simply enjoy being controversial? Do his critics have genuine issues to grind with him, or are they, as Mazrui describes them, "professional Mazrui bashers" due to professional rivalry? The subsequent chapters of the book give readers the opportunity to draw their own conclusions.

In chapter 2, Mazrui presents Africa as a product "of the confluence of indigenous, Islamic and Western civilization[s]" (pp. 21-25) and juxtaposes the contributions of Islam and Christianity to Africa. This raises an interesting debate as to which religion is more appropriate for Africa. Using the position of Edward Blyden, a member of the African diaspora and a Presbyterian minister, the book concludes that Islam, as opposed to Christianity, is more appropriate because it strengthens and hastens certain agencies and self-reliance (*ibid.*).

The next issue worth noting is the sentiments of Mazrui's critics and admirers as regards his above-mentioned television series "The Africans." Many western scholars criticized the series for "frequently degenerat[ing] into anti-Western diatribe" (p. 28). Mazrui and his admirers, however, defended it on the grounds that Africans have the right to tell their story from their own perspective and not that of the West (pp. 47-59). In fact, this position reminds one of the Aboriginal scholar James M. Blaut's articulation of decolonization:

[The process of decolonization is in two parts]; the need to resurrect one's own history and its contributions to the history of the world; and secondly, to re-write colonial history to show how it has led to poverty rather than progress.²

By telling Africa's history as it is, Mazrui is resisting what Michel Foucault referred to in his writings as the "amputation" of the past and

troubling the dominant discourse, which attempts to place Africa's crisis at its doorstep while ignoring the colonizers' complicity. Therefore, one should view this series as an academic revolt by African scholars who seek to challenge the sense of comfort and complacency in the dominant discourse, which validates the Eurocentric historical account of Africa as the only one worth telling. If western scholars are not happy with the presentation of both sides, it is because their historical and contemporary roles in Africa have not been positive.

Another insightful subject discussed in the chapter is the influence of the Arab and Jewish cultures on black Africa, such as Nigeria and Ethiopia, respectively. According to Mazrui, Arab cultural influence can be seen in intermarriage, linguistics (Arabic words in such neo-Semitic African languages as Hausa, Amharic, and Kiswahili), and architecture (pp. 69-82). However, the Africanist Hailu Habtu criticizes Mazrui for portraying Africa as "a cultural bazaar" where "a wide variety of ideas and values, drawn from different civilizations compete for the attention of African buyers" (p. 86). In other words, Mazrui articulates the influence of other civilizations on Africa, but surprisingly leaves out Africa's contributions to other civilizations.

Adding his voice to the critics, Wole Soyinka, the 1986 Nobel Laureate prize winner in literature and African English literature condemned Mazrui's Triple Heritage³ theory for overglorifying Islam and Christianity as superpowers, while simultaneously denigrating authentic African spirituality (pp. 120-27). By limiting the search for an antidote to various debilitating phenomena (e.g., corruption in Africa and many other problems) to only Christianity and Islam (pp. 21-25), Mazrui is academically suffocating, trivializing, and misrepresenting the potency of Africa's indigenous legacy in favor of these religions.

Even though Mazrui denies ever attempting to denigrate indigenous African legacies (pp. 106-07), Soyinka wittingly likened these "exonerating" efforts to a local fable about an African rodent that "blows soothing air on the wound of its human victim after every bite" (p. 122). Such "rodently" efforts are not enough to salvage the festering tooth marks that Mazrui leaves after offensively biting into Africa's indigenous religions and spirituality. In any case, before the advent of Christianity and Islam, such indigenous beliefs as the ability of lesser deities and ancestors to punish criminals were enough to police society. Only when Christianity and Islam derogated and labeled these beliefs as "superstition" and "fetishization" did the pillars holding these moral contours together collapse.

Another interesting aspect is the section on Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (Viking: 1988), a swipe at the Qur'an that caused Ayatollah Khomeini to pass a death-sentence fatwa on him (pp. 143-71). Mazrui honestly explains his dilemma in dealing with this issue, giving his position as "a believer in Islam and a believer in the open society ... a believer in the Shari`ah and an opponent of all forms of capital punishment" (p. 146). However, such sentiments did not prevent him from condemning the book and showing his sympathy with the Muslim community and Khomeini. In fact, he used the occasion to attack western society, especially Britain, the United States, and France, for condemning Khomeini and offering their support and protection to Rushdie.

Mazrui centered his condemnation on both historical and contemporary examples, which suggest that if the shoe had been on the other foot, the response would have been outrage. To Mazrui, such a hypocritical stand by the West not only confounds logic, but also confirms its continued ethnocentric views in matters of ideology, religion, politics, and race. Mazrui's concern raises a serious question as to whether the West crossed the line in protecting Rushdie. To be fair to Mazrui, however, he was not against this protection; rather, he was quite worried by the promotion and support accorded to Rushdie and his book.

The next chapter is devoted to issues of gender and sexuality in Africa. Using historical and contemporary examples, with an occasional comparative analysis between the West and Africa, Mazrui categorizes issues of gender in Africa as "benevolent," "benign," and "malignant" (pp. 211-21). He cites the matrilineal system of inheritance and bride wealth paid by African men to women as examples of benevolent sexism. According to him, such practices could sometimes translate into real power for women. Even though Mazrui is not against this practice, he reduces its relevancy by equating this African traditional custom to such western male niceties as opening doors and carrying heavy suitcases for women (pp. 211-14).

On the issue of benign sexism, Mazrui contends that the dominant gender (man) is not being gallant and chivalrous to the disadvantaged gender (woman), even though various subcultural traditions could sometimes be to the advantage or disadvantage of women (ibid.). Malignant sexism is defined as the "most pervasive and most insidious; [because] in most cases [it subjects] women to economic manipulation, sexual exploitation and political marginalization" (p. 218). Beneath sexism is the paradox of gender. Here, women are seen as mothers and men are seen as warriors.

Unfortunately, the power of destruction has given men dominion over women as their rulers.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, a professor in the Department of English and Modern Languages at Albany State University and a feminist activist, problematizes Mazrui's analysis by insisting that such a paradigm draws the discourse backward while obscuring the crucial fact that sexism is not a joking matter (p. 237). To her, trivializing sexism by constructing a hierarchy of benevolent, benign, and malignant sexism, although intellectually innovative, downplays its intrinsic and inherent destruction. Earlier on, Naira Sudarkasa, a former professor of anthropology as well as African and African-American studies at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, raised the alarm bells on Mazrui's analysis: "Given the basic contrast in the meaning attached to the term 'sexism,' it was predictable that Mazrui's paradigm of benevolent, benign and malignant sexism would be challenged by scholars in the area of Women's Studies" (p. 202).

In addition to the issue raised by Ogundipe-Leslie and Sudarkasa, I feel uncomfortable with Mazrui's generalization of the matrilineal system of inheritance as an example of benevolent sexism. From my position as a male Ashanti of Ghana, this system of inheritance is far from benevolent, for it is designed to ensure that the family's inheritance does not go to a person whose blood is not related to that of the family. After all, it is a well-known fact that "only mothers can truly know the fathers of their children."

On the issue of same-sex marriage, Mazrui eloquently and rightly posits that since such unions are the result of individual actions, "they [should] be matters of the church, but not for the head of states ... The Almighty may judge, but not the state" (p. 261). He insists that the challenges facing African families today should not be blamed on same-sex marriage: "We can defend our African families without using our gay brothers [and lesbian sisters] as scapegoats" (p. 263).

The volume's last chapter deals with issues of race and reparations.⁴ Mazrui and the Group of Eminent Persons on Reparations contend that "the West is by far the greater culprit in African enslavement than either Arabs or Africans" (p. 277). Thus, it is fair to make the West compensate Africa for its role in, and the benefits derived from, slavery and colonialism. When asked if the Arab world also should pay reparations to Africa, Mazrui responded that even if it were to do so, it should not follow the same criteria as the West. His position is centered on the notion that "the issue of where an Arab ends and an African begins is a continuum; whereas, the issue of where the West ends in [the] US [and] the black man begins is a dichotomy" (p. 299).

Mazrui has been criticized for allowing his loyalty to his Islamic faith to cloud his position (pp. 290-91). Indeed, his argument that Arab slaves were treated better than their counterparts in the West, and thus for the issue of the Arab world's reparations to Africa being treated differently, is neither here nor there. The notion of reparations does not depend on how slaves were treated, but on the fact that both the Arab world and the West benefited from this slave trade – to the detriment of Africa. Hence, the call for reparations. Bethwell Ogot, director of the Institute of Research and Postgraduate Studies at Kenya's Maseno University College, reinforces this idea:

To recognize [the role of Arabs in the slave trade] is not to lessen the guilt of Western nations; and in order to understand the nature of the African enslavement we should avoid hunting for historical villains. We should acknowledge the shared guilt between Muslims and Christians, between the West and the Middle East, and the moral blindness that led to centuries of immeasurable sufferings for Africans. (pp. 291-92)

Contrary to Ogot's position, other critics like J. Covington in his letter to the editor of Nairobi's *Sunday Nation*, criticized the concept of reparations because, in his opinion, "slavery is a dead issue – or should be" (p. 319). Ironically, Covington and others who share this view see nothing wrong with Germany compensating the Jews for what the Nazis did to them during World War II. If what is good for the goose is equally good for the gander, then I do not see why Africa should be treated differently – unless the lives of Africans are not of equal value as the lives of other people.

Governance and Leadership

The second volume analyzes governance and leadership in Africa. The first chapter is devoted to leadership. Mazrui paints a dismal picture of the leadership style of Kwame Nkrumah (1909-72), Ghana's first prime minister and one of the early proponents of Pan-Africanism. He presents Nkrumah as a man who sought to carve a name for himself as the Lenin of Africa but instead, unfortunately, became the czar of Ghana. Mazrui sees his tragedy as one of excess, rather than one of contradiction, because he tried to be too much of a revolutionary monarch (p. 12). After relating Nkrumah's political career in Ghana and Africa, Mazrui concludes that he was a great Gold Coaster and African, but fell short of becoming a great Ghanaian (p. 30).

Perhaps the harshest criticism of Nkrumah comes from Russell Warren Howe, a former recipient of an American Press award and a Ford fellow in advanced international reporting. Seeing Nkrumah as a hypocrite who preached virtue and practiced vice, Howe welcomed his overthrow as an event that would help Africa progress. Many of Nkrumah's admirers responded to this criticism by castigating Mazrui for his "parochial" analysis of Nkrumah and questioning his academic loyalty to Africa, since he created a platform that enabled a person like Howe to tarnish Nkrumah's hard-won image as one of Africa's greatest sons (pp. 44-59 and 62-65). As Ama Ata Aidoo, the renowned African writer, sarcastically wrote in her postscript letter to *Transition*:

We are also grateful to our own Professor Ali Mazrui and all other objective and non-partisan African intellectuals and journalists who make the writing and publication of papers like Mr. Howe's possible. (ibid.)

As a person born and raised in Ghana, I know for a fact that the name Nkrumah evokes passion and anger among Ghanaians. Even though I have been very sympathetic to those who suffered under his bad policies, I still concede – and many Ghanaians would agree with me – that no Ghanaian head of state could equate or surpass Nkrumah's achievement. What, then, disqualifies him from being a great Ghanaian, as postulated by Mazrui? Indeed Nkrumah, like any other leader, has his own shortcomings. Nevertheless, this does not make him a poor leader. Howe's comments are not only insulting to history, but also an example of the intellectual dishonesty of western writers who tend to misrepresent African history. For instance, Africa's historical contribution to the production of knowledge has been negated and appropriated by the West's knowledge system without any recognition. Such intellectual dishonesty continues to allow western scholars to present themselves as the civilizers, saviors, initiators, mentors, and arbiters of Africa.⁵

Mazrui also writes about President Julius Nyerere (1922-99) of Tanzania. He claims to respect Nyerere for his intellectual stature, originality of thought, consistent support of the pan-Africanist dream, and for not creating a personality cult as many of his peers in Africa did. However, he accuses Nyerere of stabbing other intellectuals in the back and describes him as "a traitor to his class" (p. 88). The last comment attracted critics (pp. 92-117) who said that Mazrui was "crying wolf when there is none" and challenged him to substantiate his charges.

This chapter concludes by comparing Nkrumah with former president J. J. Rawlings, who ruled Ghana from 1981 to 2000 (pp. 132-34). According to Mazrui's assessment, by leading Ghana through a peaceful transition toward democratization, Rawlings left "a better legacy" to Ghanaians than Nkrumah did (ibid.). This position attracted mixed reactions from Ghanaians (pp. 142-57). As a Ghanaian who experienced Rawlings' 19-year rule, I can neither comprehend how Mazrui could compare his achievements to those of Nkrumah, nor how he could place the former above the latter. Rawlings committed more human right violations in Ghana than any other leader of the country. For instance, he executed three military heads of state and four top-ranking military officers for staging a coup d'état, and yet later on overthrew a constitutional government. He claimed not to believe in multiparty democracy, and yet for some reason contested and won two multiparty elections to be a constitutionally elected president for 8 years.

In his opinion piece in a local Ghanaian newspaper, Amamoo describes Rawlings' 19-year rule as:

... a military dictator and a most brutal one ... for eleven long nightmarish years and for eight more years, with the country under a quasi-democratic state of government, he presided over. This period unleashed the most violent abuses of human rights in the history of this country. Neither he nor his colleagues have, to date, ever accounted for their stewardship to the people of Ghana.⁶

In the face of such overwhelming evidence and other stories of brutality and atrocities under the Rawlings administration, it confounds logic for our learned professor to place his rule alongside that of Nkrumah. In fact, doing so even edges the former above the latter. Unless Mazrui is writing as a politician rather than as a political scientist, there is no way such a blatant misjudgment can be justified. Kwame Okoampa-Ahoofe, Jr., from Nassau Community College of the State University of New York, Garden City, argues:

[When] Professor Mazrui curiously declared President Nkrumah, along with the swashbuckling and sanguinary Flt.-Lt. Jerry John Rawlings, as the greatest leader Ghana had ever had, it came off as quite an amusement. Some of us even felt that Professor Mazrui was up to something hardly noble; perhaps he wanted to insult the intelligence of Ghanaians, presuming these putatively mild-mannered and affable Africans to be woefully amnesiac. Or perhaps the aging Kenyan scholar felt that it

would be rather too dangerous to attempt to malign the man who had just then been fittingly and refreshingly rehabilitated by his very own detractors during the course of the preceding decade. In sum, Professor Mazrui must have been trying to act politically correctly.⁷

Chapter 2 analyzes issues of policy and governance in Africa. Mazrui, like Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount, advises some countries about various prudent measures that need to be taken in order to ameliorate instances of political upheaval, a well-known historical problem in Africa (pp. 166-71). He categorizes African countries into “coup prone” (i.e., Uganda) and “coup proof” (i.e., Senegal). He then suggests what policies and governance styles should be adopted in these countries to avoid future coups.

Perhaps what most stands out in this chapter is the paper that Mazrui delivered in Nigeria, one in which he sought to portray the imposition of the Shari`ah in northern Nigeria as politically motivated. According to him, power has been fairly balanced in Nigeria: Historically, the southerners were economically powerful while the northerners controlled political power. Nevertheless, the 1999 election of a southerner, Olusegun Obasanjo, as president has ruptured this arrangement. In other words, the south has now taken both the “crown and the jewels” (pp. 201-09, 231-34, and 261-76). Therefore, the north invoked the Shari`ah in its quest for internal identity and ancestry to solve its sense of marginalization (ibid.). Besides, the Shari`ah was a bargaining chip used to express the north’s displeasure (ibid.). As expected, this position attracted a lot of criticism for ignoring the north’s minority Christian community and unnecessarily fueling the existing tensions between the two regions (pp. 209-56).

In fact, Mazrui would have saved himself a great deal of trouble if he had just articulated the Shari`ah’s strengths as an alternative to Nigeria’s conventional legal system. But by being very political and openly declaring his sympathy with the north, he was sending a wrong – and dangerous – signal that could instigate the military in the north to rise up against the elected southern president. Beyond that, his analysis could wrongly justify the actions of Ibrahim Babangida (Nigeria’s northern military ruler from 1985-93), who annulled a fair election won by Moshood Abiola in 1993, a southerner – an action that has prolonged Nigeria’s crisis.

Chapter 3 talks about Pan-African solutions. Mazrui suggests that the large African countries should recolonize or engage in self-colonization in order to put the young and weaker countries on the right path (pp. 339-55). He believes that recolonization could be benevolent, benign, and malignant.

For example, benevolent recolonization occurs when the colonized benefits more than the colonizer, while benign recolonization means that both countries receive equal benefits. In malignant recolonization, however, the colonizer benefits more than the colonized. An example of benevolent recolonization occurred when Tanganyika took over Zanzibar in the 1960s during a period of upheaval in the latter. Tanzania's brief occupation of Uganda after invading it in 1979 to topple Idi Amin, who had invaded Tanzania in 1978, is an example of benign recolonization. An example of malignant recolonization happened when Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia tried to annex Eritrea after its liberation from Italian colonial rule in 1941.

According to Mazrui, benevolent or benign recolonization will ensure stability in Africa. Not surprisingly, this position started a heated debate between Mazrui and Archie Mafeje, a professor at the Department of Anthropology at American University. The latter saw Mazrui's suggestion as a "recipe for disaster" (pp. 357-74 and 425-30). Although the truth is that Mazrui's concept of large countries supporting weaker ones is noble, the content within which it was put could be dangerous and send the wrong message. Like the concept "postcolonial," the term *recolonization* rightly evokes anger and protest, no matter how one explains and uses it. Mazrui, once again, fails to recognize that by using such loose terms he is opening a Pandora's box of misinterpretation on the part of his readers. For instance, should one view the American invasion of Iraq as benevolent or benign recolonization? After all, is it not a case of a big brother "checking" a younger one's failure to behave? In any case, if the recent efforts of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to find a lasting solution in the crises in Cote d'Ivoire and Togo are what Mazrui means by recolonization or self-colonization, then he needs to find a better term.

The book ends with an epilogue on Ali Mazrui. The editors provide a thorough summary of all of the chapters in the two volumes under review. They rightly acknowledge that writing about Mazrui could be an easy task, for there is a great deal of available material. However, analyzing him could be very challenging because of how he postulates his ideas (pp. 431-50).

Conclusion

Both volumes provide a fair platform for Mazrui's critics and supporters to air their views. Such intellectual tolerance provides readers with sufficient information to draw their own conclusions about the debate. In general, the books are very sympathetic to Islam. From issues relating to Salman

Rushdie to reparations for Africa, Mazrui's responses display his loyalty to his Islamic faith. In addition, he cleverly uses his work to rally support for issues affecting the Muslim community. For instance, juxtaposing *The Satanic Verses* to *Mein Kampf* (pp. 164-68) is an example of how he tries to elicit support from other communities on issues affecting the Muslim world. However, his effort to establish anti-black racism in *The Satanic Verses* (pp. 164-67) was academic overkill and a fruitless exercise. The debate between Mazrui and Soyinka, as well as the one with Mafeje (1:101-44 and 2:342-74) could be considered as the lowest points. I thought that these debates went beyond productive academic discussion and egged in a personal and historical "war" between Mazrui and both of these critics. In short, it was a disservice to the readers.

In spite of that, these volumes are very informative and educative for students who are interested in understanding the politics of Africa, especially the impact of the West and the Arab world on the continent. They also have the capacity to elicit discussion and whip up strong sentiments, passions, and anger among their readers. The collections herein place these books among the few available works that can boast of a wide range of scholarly knowledge on Africa. These volumes could be said to be the epitome of Mazrui's work, and therefore should be a bonus for anyone interested in his scholarly endeavors. In addition, the editors should be commended for making sure that the relevant correspondence was discussed under each theme, as indicated in the chapters.

In fact, Mazrui's writing style and analytic skills always manage to provoke both his critics and his admirers to respond to his claims. Even though the essence of these volumes is to bring out the correspondence between Mazrui and his critics and admirers, I would not be surprised if this series creates yet another forum for further responses from his readers. In all, these volumes are must-reads for all African students and anybody interested in studying Africa. In my opinion, two things are consistent throughout Mazrui's writings, at least in these two volumes: his passionate defense of any issue affecting his Islamic faith or the Arab world, and his ability to generate controversy on every issue that he explores.

Earlier on, I mentioned Nyang's comment that Mazrui is "a master word-monger and certainly does not belong to that class of men who lament that words fail them." While this assessment is true, it also tends to be his Achilles' heel. His masterly control of English sometimes influences him to evoke certain words that generate controversy. Such situations tend to shift the discussion away from the noble idea to the political correctness of the

word. There were instances in these two volumes in which Mazrui's choice of words generated a debate that painfully shifted the discussion from the noble concept being analyzed. In short, whether Ali Mazrui is an independent thinker or just a controversial one, history will always place him where he belongs: an intellectual both loved and hated by many people for what he stands for, speaks for, and talks against.

Endnotes

1. S. S. Nyang, *Ali Mazrui: The Man and His Works* (Lawrenceville, VA: Brunswick Publishing Co., 1981), 36.
2. F. J. Graveline, *Circle Works: Transforming Eurocentric Consciousness* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1998).
3. This concept views Africa as having been influenced by indigenous or traditional African practices, as well as by the western (Christian) and Arab (Islamic) cultures.
4. Reparations is a new debate that Africans should be compensated for the pains and suffering inflicted upon Africa during the slave trade and colonialism by the West and the Arab world. For more information on the Group of Eminent Persons on Reparations, see www.arm.arc.co.uk/abujaProclamation.html.
5. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967); V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (London: James Currey, 1988); and F. B. Nyamnjoh, "A Relevant Education for African Development – Some Epistemological Considerations," *African Development* 29, no. 1 (November 2004): 161-84. Published by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA).
6. J. G. Amamoo, "Ex-President Rawlings lets down the nation, Ghana, again," *The Ghanaian Chronicle*, 1 April 2005. www.ghanaiian-chronicle.com/thestory.asp?id.
7. K. Okoampa-Ahoofe, "The Enduring Legacy of Dr. J. B. Danquah - Part II," 15 March 2005. www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomepage/News/Archive/article.phd?.