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The Struggle for Liberty in Africa

MAGATTE WADE

I was born in Senegal, on the west coast of Africa, and right around age seven the biggest question of my life came to me. Because right around that time, my family decided that I should join my parents in Germany. They had gone there a couple of years before, to find a better life for me and my siblings. And once they determined that they were going to stay, they sent for me to come to them.

There are two things I will never forget. The first is my grandmother telling me: “You are about to go to this place where almost no one is going to look like you. Literally not look like you. They’re going to have a different skin color.” And she said, “Also, most of them will be speaking a language you do not speak.”



MAGATTE WADE is a Senegalese entrepreneur, producing traditional health and beauty products for export. She spoke at a Cato Policy Perspectives seminar in San Francisco in April.

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Back then I spoke French and Wolof, the traditional language of Senegal. And she said, “Also, those kids are engaged in a process that you have not been engaged in, which is going to school. But I don’t want any of that to intimidate you. Their different skin color is still a color of skin of a human. That language that they’re speaking might be different, but it is still a human language. They’re human and so are you. And going to school is something that little humans do. Therefore, let none of that intimidate you. Go over there and you’ll figure it out, because you are no less than anybody.” With that message, she sent me off.

So, I went to Germany, and I saw that all that my grandma had said was true, but another thing I immediately noticed was all this infrastructure around me. All these paved roads everywhere, and the fact that all the homes had a phone, even though back then it was still landlines. I turned a faucet and the water’s coming straight out, you know, it’s just all of these weird things. And to me, that was so strange. So my question at age seven was: “How come they have this, and we don’t?” And it became a lifelong question that I had to answer.

“Each one of these issues is a direct consequence of poverty.”

Along the way, I would read about the issue in the news, I would read theories from intellectuals, and I would hear from my friends (and people who were not so friendly). It seems everybody had an opinion as to why my country and countries like it were poor. Some people would say, “Oh, it’s just because Africans have a lower IQ.” Oh, I’ve heard stuff like that! As a matter of fact, at one of my UC Berkeley talks, one of the students basically was making in so many ways the case that, “You know, Africans, maybe they should be recolonized, because left to themselves they’re just busy hacking each other apart.” I heard a lot of theories. And other people made it sound like, “Oh, if only you bring them clean water, they will no longer be poor.” Others think, “Oh, if only these people are better educated, we will no longer be poor.” But do you know how many PhDs are walking in the streets of Dakar, the capital city of my country? A lot. Sitting home, waiting for a job to happen, living in poverty, basically – with their PhDs in English Literature, French, Dutch, or whatever.

So I’ve heard it all. Has anyone here checked the UN sustainable development goals lately? 17 goals that we’re trying to reach. If you look at the 17 goals, what do you see? I see that each one of these issues is a direct consequence of poverty.

Think about it. Who doesn't have access to clean water? Who does not have access to nutritious foods and is malnourished? Somebody who's poor, that's who.

So, as I started asking myself that question, it became very clear eventually that they're poor because they have no money. They have no money because they have no source of income. Where does a source of income come from for most of us? A job, right? Where do jobs come from? They come from businesses, right? And most importantly, we know that the group of businesses that bring us most of the jobs that we need are small and medium-sized enterprises. That group is usually the backbone of any healthy economic society, creating the middle class.

“What does it truly mean to lack economic freedom?”

So then, if it's jobs that we need so badly to fix this problem of poverty, then don't you think that we should start to look at the business environment that these countries offer their citizens? I think we should. I have two indexes that I have been relying on for so long. One is the Doing Business Index of the World Bank. Another one is the Fraser Institute's Economic Freedom of the World index, published together with Cato. When you look at those, most sub-Saharan African countries, except for maybe four or five, are basically competing with each other for the bottom of the list. It's insane. Out of 54 countries in Africa, maybe a half-dozen at best aren't at the bottom of these rankings.

And that, my friends, is the reason why Africa is overwhelmingly poor, despite having so much in terms of natural and human resources. We have not accomplished the level of prosperity that we should have achieved by now. So, I was right to reject all these silly other ideas that people have been trying to make me believe. It's really about economic freedom.

But what does it truly mean to lack economic freedom? Because oftentimes, I think where we tend to lose the people is that we talk in these abstract terms. Most people don't understand what we're talking about. I would tell my friend, “See, it is harder to do business anywhere in sub-Saharan Africa than it is anywhere in Scandinavia. Do you know that most Scandinavian countries are more capitalist than almost any African countries?” They look at me with round eyes. “What the hell are you talking about?” Then I have to go deep into what does that mean. I'm going to tell you what it means to be towards the bottom of that ranking of the World Bank's Doing Business Index.

One of my company's key products is a lip balm. And in there, we have seven ingredients—very clean ingredients, high quality. So, I must be at a certain level, standards-wise, and I need certain suppliers. (By the way, the brand is being launched at Whole Foods at the end of June, and you all know how Whole Foods rolls—they do not take just anybody on board. Actually, there is a four-month process—they check everything! But we made it.) Out of those ingredients, I can only find two of them of the quality that I need in my country. The others I must import, but some come with a 45% tariff. And a few others, they come in with a 70% tariff!

Taxes? In Senegal, we're flirting with spot 180 or 182 on the Doing Business Index for how hard it is to pay your taxes. That means that if I want to do business in Senegal legitimately, I have to hire experts—tax experts, because the tax law is so complicated it can fit into truckloads of paperwork. I have to hire special people who are gonna cost me a lot of money, and even then, will make mis-

“The government tells me what to do at every single turn.”

takes, because the law is so complicated. So, one day you may hear that Magatte was not able to come back to the United States because I'm in jail. Every day that I'm walking around, I am at the risk of being harassed or put in jail by my country. And they can catch me on some very stupid tax laws, because maybe even the expert made an honest mistake.

Another problem has to do with labor laws. You know, in Senegal, you are technically almost married to your employee. I have no freedom of even association with my employees. The government tells me what to do at every single turn. It's insane—the whole thing is insane.

Beyond the ability to bring prosperity to people, these ideas that we talk about here also bring dignity to people. These notions, and the principles of free markets, and capitalism winning over socialism. . . I hope you can now see everything that's at stake there for me. I always try to bring it back to the human story. I like to say that “I fight for the right of the individuals, because it all begins with the individuals.” It all starts from there.

But I don't see those people who oppose us as my enemies. The truth is, a lot of them care. Now, can we redirect their care towards the right solution? I think we can. So, I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to share this with you. ■



SCHOLAR PROFILE

Trevor Burrus

TREVOR BURRUS is a research fellow in the Cato Institute's Robert A. Levy Center for Constitutional Studies, and editor-in-chief of the *Cato Supreme Court Review*. He is also the co-host of Libertarianism.org's *Free Thoughts*, a weekly podcast that covers topics in libertarian theory, history, and philosophy.

How did you become interested in libertarian ideas, and what brought you to Cato?

I'm a congenital libertarian. I wrote a libertarian column for my high school newspaper, and I've wanted to work at Cato since I was 15. I did my undergrad in philosophy at CU Boulder where I met Aaron Powell, now the director of Libertarianism.org, and we started a website together that mostly discussed religion and political philosophy. During law school I started to focus on becoming well-versed in libertarian legal theory. I also had the opportunity to work for David Kopel, a Cato adjunct scholar and renowned gun policy expert. I was lucky enough to be a Cato intern in the summer after I graduated, and then I got hired. It's been quite a trip, and that Aaron and I both work here makes it even crazier.

You recently took over as editor-in-chief of the *Cato Supreme Court Review*. How has the *Review* influenced scholarly and public perception of the Court's rulings?

The *Review* is an important component in the mission of the Robert A. Levy Center for Constitutional Studies: to articulate and defend a "third way" of constitutional jurisprudence that is distinct from the Robert Bork-style originalism of conservatives and the "living Constitution" of the progressives. We advocate for an engaged judiciary that properly interprets and enforces the Constitution, including those provisions

that conservatives shy away from such as the Ninth Amendment and the Privilege or Immunities Clause. Since the founding of the Center by Roger Pilon, libertarian jurisprudence has become an identifiable school of thought with influence on the courts. The *Review* has been a big part of that.

Part of your portfolio includes overseeing Cato's *amicus curiae* ("friend of the court") brief program. What makes for an effective amicus brief?

Effective amicus briefs differ depending on whether the brief is filed in support of certiorari—meaning supporting the Supreme Court granting review—or on the merits—supporting a party after the Court has granted review. Effective "cert briefs" explain to the Court why the issue is important and why the case is a good one for resolving the issue. Our cert briefs often highlight how big a problem is and why the issue won't go away without the Court's help. Amicus briefs on the merits explain why you think a certain party should win. Our briefs often give guidance to the justices on historical or economic aspects to a question.

You also write on political philosophy and history, and cohost the *Free Thoughts* podcast with Aaron Powell. How does political philosophy and history inform your policy and legal work?

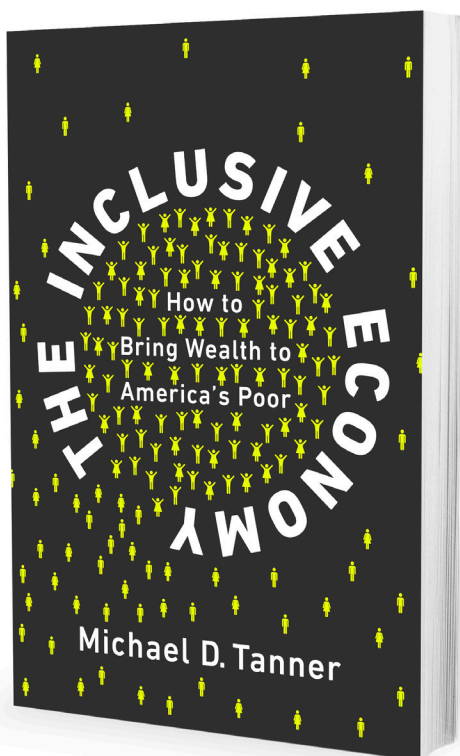
Political philosophy is necessary to building a coherent set of principles for guiding pub-

lic policy reasoning. For example, what is a “crime” and is it possible to commit a “crime” against yourself? The answer is no, which is why the criminalization of drug use and consensual sexual acts between adults is unacceptable. Adhering to such principles helped libertarians be leaders on questions like drug legalization and gay marriage. Learning history helps highlight the contingencies that helped produce our world. The structures of many of our institutions, such as health care or education, were not inevitable. Learning how things got this way can be a valuable step in figuring out how to take them apart.

Since you joined Cato in 2010, which policy areas or legal doctrines do you think have gotten worse, and which have most improved?

The big ones would obviously be marijuana legalization and gay marriage. Those were major victories. Also, in many other areas we’re starting to win small but important legal victories that are helping to gradually roll back the administrative state, and that’s a trend I expect to continue. In other areas, however, things are getting worse. Bush, Obama, and now Trump have pushed executive power to new heights. The good fight is still worth fighting, though. Always. ■

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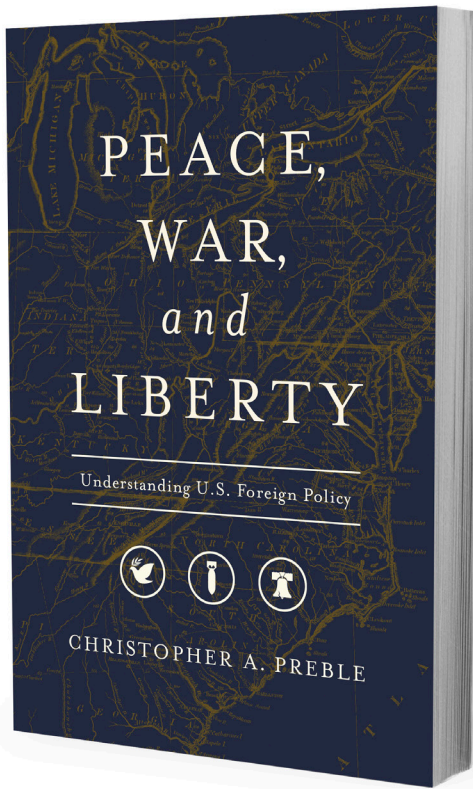
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Over the coming years, Cato will continue to confront threats to our values—like the rise of populism, hostility to free speech, and the big-government leviathan that would entangle commerce in red tape and halt the progress transforming the developing world. Our community is animated by promoting liberty, and Cato's central role in developing the public policies, communications, and outreach activities that present the best chances for our success. ■

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