To be frank, before Dr. Mickler approached me about talking this evening, I did not know about Africa Day. I accepted the invitation to speak and then started researching the anniversary. Now, I knew that the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was founded on May 25 in 1963 and was succeeded by the African Union (AU) on the 26th of May in 2001, but I was not aware of any anniversary commemorating this. So, in thinking about the meaning and significance of Africa Day, and finding out more about it, I have been preoccupied with concerns about legitimacy, which will become clearer as I go on. I have realised that for me, the anniversary poses more questions than it answers.

As I have already mentioned, Africa Day commemorates the foundation of the Organisation of African Unity, a continental organisation made up of newly independent African states, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on May 25 in 1963. The OAU played a key role in the decolonisation efforts of African people. It promoted unity and solidarity amongst African people and states, but it was not without its flaws. It honoured principles of non-interference, whereby leaders had exclusive authority within their borders and were essentially beyond reproach. This was because it wanted to safeguard the sovereignty of newly independent African states.

Unfortunately this also had the effect of distancing the organisation from ordinary people by privileging the interests of national elites, which hindered the OAU’s efforts to foster a strong pan-African identity amongst Africa’s diverse peoples. Its successor organisation, the African Union was meant to remedy the OAU’s shortcomings through a renewed pan-Africanism that emphasised the needs of ordinary African people, the urban poor, peasants, women and girls, by moving away from non-interference norms to those of non-indifference. It looked to legitimise the organisation in the eyes of the broader public.

Leaders are – supposedly – no longer beyond reproach and increasingly the AU is intervening in countries facing conflicts or subjected to unconstitutional changes of government. This has been made possible by the development of norms and institutions that promote good governance and peace across the continent.

However, most of the AU’s funding comes from external actors looking to further their own interests in Africa, which highlights the main problem facing the AU and one that the OAU was faced with as well: legitimacy amongst African people. Many African people are not aware of the AU’s existence,
many still are not aware of its aims, let alone can they be sure that it seeks to empower them. This has important implications for Africa Day, which again, the majority of Africans on the continent are not aware of.

There is, however, much higher awareness of Africa Day amongst the African diaspora, including across Australia, which celebrates it with fervour, possibly a result of being so far away from home. Like me a week ago, however, not everyone in the diaspora is aware of the anniversary. This highlights the importance of thinking about how and why a day comes to be meaningful and significant, as well as which actors are active in making it so.

With Africa Day, as with most things, there are multiple actors involved in determining what the day represents. For the African diaspora, Africa Day means the celebration of Africa’s diversity. It means the creation of community amongst African immigrants. It is about learning to be in struggle with each other against the myriad forces oppressing us, and about taking pride in the decolonisation and development achievements of African people and states, whilst acknowledging the work and challenges that lie ahead in building a self-reliant Africa.

Africa Day is also celebrated by many of the governments of the different countries home to the African diaspora. There are many opportunities in Africa that external actors look to take advantage of, and celebrations of Africa Day and the achievements it symbolises are a means of doing so. Africa Day not only fosters community building amongst the African diaspora, but offers others the opportunity to create partnerships with various African actors.

This is highlighted by the fact that this year President Jacob Zuma is leading South African Africa Day celebrations under the theme “We are Africa”. The South African government website states that the theme “is a declaration and celebratory statement of pride, which fosters inclusivity from all role-players and stakeholders,” in moving Africa forward. This is noteworthy given not only the interests of external actors in Africa, but also given recent xenophobic violence against foreign nationals in South Africa. How does the South African government reconcile state sanctioned violence against non-South Africans in the form of Operation Fiela, for example, with celebrations of Africa Day?

Whilst the inclusivity touted by President Zuma may seem positive on the outset, we should ask which role-players and stakeholders’ interests are privileged in Africa’s development. This is important given Africa Day, first and
foremost, commemorates decolonisation and liberation. What does liberation look like in the 21st century? What needs to be done at the national, regional, and continental levels for the African Union and commemorations of the organisation to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the ordinary African?

In answering these questions I think it is important to keep in mind what Henri Lefebvre said in his *Critique of Everyday Life*. And I know everyone came here to listen to the words of a French intellectual, but in it he argued that any meaningful change, anywhere in the world, must be predicated upon a knowledge of everyday life that puts the experiences and needs of ordinary people – the urban poor, peasants – often ignored in historical narratives at the forefront of struggles for change. This requires “role-players and stakeholders” to come up with development solutions that do not lie about whom they seek to empower, that do not disguise harms incurred by the masses. This is important if we want future Africa Days celebrated by all.