Africa’s Challenge to International Relations Theory edited by Kevin C. Dunn and Timothy M. Shaw

Africa’s Challenge to International Relations Theory is a fine collection of essays on the relevance of some African issues to International Relations theories. Africa is a neglected area in mainstream IR theory. As Kevin Dunn argues in the introductory chapter, there is nevertheless no theoretical or empirical justification for the negligence (pp. 1–6). Craig Murphy, a noted scholar of International Relations, also generously adds his voice in the foreword to the book: ‘More than one out of ten people are African. More than one out of four nations are African. Yet, I would warrant that fewer than one in a hundred university lectures on International Relations (IR) given in Europe or North America even mention the continent’ (p. ix). The book has thirteen chapters clustered into conceptual, theoretical and policy-oriented issues. The volume raises important questions and offers counter-arguments to the ‘great power’ theories of IR after bringing to focus the relevance of certain themes in Africa’s inter-state and intra-state politics.

The first chapter, Assis Malaquias’s ‘Reformulating International Relations Theory: African insights and challenges’, disputes the propriety of using the state as a unit of analysis for explaining Africa’s international relations and, with the help of an illustrative case study of UNITA, suggests that nations and armed nationalist movements should instead be considered more important in this regard. The international relations of UNITA are certainly inexplicable if we were to rely solely on state-centric theories; even so, a question remains. Is analysis based on UNITA typical enough to warrant a call for a more inclusive conceptualisation of Africa’s international relations anchored in nations and other sub-state actors? Such an approach might succeed ‘in dethroning the hegemony of the Westphalian framework imposed on Africa through colonialism’ (p. 28). But it is far from clear if that would necessarily enhance our understanding of Africa’s international relations. The rapprochement between UNITA and the Angolan government following the death of Jonas Savimbi also seems to further undermine Malaquias’s model.

Siba Grovogui’s ‘Sovereignty in Africa: quasi-statehood and other myths in international theory’ is a well-informed and rigorously argued critique of the predominant discourse, especially in regard to the usage of the concept of sovereignty in the African context. Taking the case of Belgium and Switzerland on the one hand, and the Congo on the other, Grovogui’s lucid analysis of aspects of the discourse on sovereignty concentrates on revealing in comparative terms ‘the analytical errors, ideological confusions, and historical omissions’ (p. 29).
Then comes Kevin C. Dunn’s ‘MadLib # 32 The (Blank) African State: rethinking the sovereign state in international relations theory’ in which the author demonstrates ‘the ways in which the state-centric approach [of mainstream IR theories] misses important elements of African international relations’ (p. 50). He then illustrates his argument with the help of four examples of non-state actors in Africa’s international relations, namely international financial institutions, regional strongmen, extractive corporations and non-state military corporations (pp. 51–5). Dunn also elaborates on why the state in Africa should be viewed as a discursive construction that exists side by side with other forms of thoughts, actions and practices. The chapter concludes with a suggestion of a line along which state could be further reconceptualised.

Janis van der Westhuzien’s ‘Marketing the “Rainbow Nation”: the power of the South African music, film and sport industry’ introduces the concept of ‘marketing power’, an extension of the concept of ‘soft power’ originally advanced by Joseph S. Nye, as a useful tool for understanding IR: ‘power can arise from many more subtle methods which play up intangible values like attraction, visibility, or appeal’ (p. 67). In sum, the author argues that power should be viewed as emanating not only from tangible resources, as the major theories of international relations have tended to do, but also from visibility or attraction. The author then analyses the cases of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa to exemplify the issues involved in the cultural ‘marketing power’ of the country.

The theoretical section which begins with John F. Clark’s ‘Realism, neorealism and Africa’s International Relations in the post-Cold War era’ is the most ambitious part of the book. Clark claims that ‘traditional’ realism (and not a modern neorealist version, globalism or liberalism) has more power and relevance for explaining the international relations of Africa (pp. 86–9). Except for a few paragraphs of passing references to Africa or specific African countries, however, the first part of the chapter reads for the most part like a modern critique of traditional realism rather than a statement of Africa’s challenge to realism or of the relevance of the theory to Africa.

The thrust of Frank’s analysis, articulated in the second portion of the chapter, is that ‘the concept of regime security appears to be particularly useful in understanding the behavior of African rulers’ (p. 94). The concept is centred on the notion that ‘a ruler needs the good will or tolerance of those who are in a position to directly threaten the control of her regime over the state apparatus’ (p. 95). However, the excessive elasticity of the concept of regime security critically undermines not only its predictive power, as the author himself admits (p. 95) but also its explanatory power, rendering it less useful for understanding the subject-matter, since in some sense or another virtually all aspects of Africa’s international relations fit such an interpretation. And yet Frank insists that ‘the concept of regime security, the coordinate threats to regime security, and the indirect causes of such threats do much to help us understand the cycles of intervention and counter-intervention in Africa’s intra-continental relations’ (p. 96). Again, Frank argues, one of the best guarantees of regime security is the mutual assurance which rulers grant each other in respect to the inviolability of colonial borders (p. 97). If this is
indeed the case, it can be argued that regime security can be best explained in terms of the neoliberal concept of ‘specific reciprocity’, rather than the ‘Realist appreciation for the axiomatic importance of power in politics of all kinds’ (p. 94).

Tandeka C. Nkiwane’s essay, ‘The End of History? African challenges to liberalism in international relations’ is a brief but a coherent attempt to situate liberalism in African political thought and Africa in liberal thought. Nkiwane specially concentrates on Africa’s challenges to democratic peace theory, which, the author (wrongly) asserts, is the outgrowth of Francis Fukuyama’s the end of history thesis (p. 105). Nkiwane concludes by adapting to Africa what the critics of ‘democratic peace’ have suggested all along: ‘Democracy … is not necessarily the primary factor that prevents war in African international relations; indeed it can actively promote war’ (p. 110). On the whole, Nkiwane’s analysis also fits well into the major theme of the book: Africa’s challenges to International Relations.

In Chapter 8, ‘Re-envisioning sovereignty: Marcus Garvey and the making of a transitional identity’, Randolph B. Persaud argues that Garveyism, or the ‘transnationalist movement aimed at the production of a global imagined community’ (p. 119), is relevant to contemporary international relations, especially in regard to the concept of sovereignty, by introducing a new principle of legitimacy which ‘advanced the idea of the protection of human dignity, even if that implied challenging the assumption of absolute control of a state’s internal affairs’ (p. 120); and by delineating clearly ‘the dual character of sovereignty – namely, the sovereignty of the state and the sovereignty of the people’ (p. 123).

The case study section begins with Sakah Mahmud’s essay, ‘Controlling African states’ behavior: international relations theory and international sanctions against Libya and Nigeria’. Mahmud grapples skillfully with the question of why sanctions imposed on weak and dependent states fail to achieve their goals. After a descriptive account of the failure of sanctions on Nigeria under Abacha and on Gadhafi’s Libya, Mahmud concludes that the failure of the sanctions is explicable in terms of ‘the employment of [a nationalist] ideology, the creative use of international norms at a regional level, and a diplomacy of solidarity – factors that conventional IR theories often fail to address’ (pp. 135–6). The reason why mainstream IR theories have proved inadequate for explaining the failure of Western sanctions against Libya and Nigeria is in part related, according to Mahmud, to the fact that ‘Western diplomacy is grounded in the concept of power and influence, where the African approach emphasizes mutual respect and cultural reciprocity’ (p. 138). Mahmud also contends that ‘explanations which attribute the failure of sanctions to reluctance or lack of vigilance on the part of the sanctioning states fail to recognize the agency of African countries in the international system’ (p. 143).

Then comes Sandra J. MacLean’s ‘Challenging Westphalia: issues of sovereignty and identity in Southern Africa’, which is in fact less about Southern Africa than about challenging Westphalia. MacLean’s essay overlaps to a significant degree with some of the preceding essays dealing with the concept of sovereignty. However, it also introduces a useful dimension to
the discussion in the contention that ‘national identities and state sovereignty are challenged, or at least complicated, by new regionalisms’ (p. 147). Such a challenge, MacLean argues, ‘threatens the acceptance of the immanence of statehood and the ontological assumptions upon which the Realist IR perspective rests’ (p. 151). The essay interweaves quite brilliantly a variety of internal and external challenges with which the Westphalian state has come to be confronted.

Chapter 11 is Larry A. Swatuk’s ‘The Brothers Grim: modernity and “international” relations in Southern Africa’. Except for generalised references to Southern Africa in a couple of places, Swatuk’s erudite, post-modernist analysis confines itself to the discussion of ‘modernity and international relations’. It underlines that to the extent that Africa represented ‘the other’ and occupied the bottom place in the consciousness of the West, it is inaccurate to say that Africa was ignored by ‘the modern world or in the study and practice of IR’ (p. 164). Swatuk also suggests that the place Africa has come to occupy is attributable to four components of the idea of modernity that form the core of the enlightenment project: the scientific method, the purported uniqueness of man, progress, and universalism (p. 166). He then briefly explains the essence and persistence of the dominant narrative and concludes with a speculation about the possibility for counter-narratives.

Part III of the book is titled ‘Implications and Policy Ramifications’, and begins with James Jude Hentz’s ‘Reconceptualising US Foreign Policy: regionalism, economic development and instability in Southern Africa’. Hentz’s central argument is that ‘Regionalism should replace bilateralism as the basic architectural principle of US–African relations’ (p. 186). The reason is that ‘bilateralism can be effective only if the African partner is a modern functioning state’ (p. 188). Hentz also makes the important distinction between market integration, ‘where economic integration focuses on trade and monetary matters and typically progresses along a linear path from a [Free Trade Area], to a customs union, a common market, and ultimately (in theory) to an economic union’ (p. 195), and developmental integration ‘in which under-developed production structures and infrastructure problems must be addressed before free trade can create new efficiencies’ (p. 195). Hentz supports the latter in contrast to the former on which, he argues, the traditional as well as the new US foreign policy towards Africa are based. He then assesses the two approaches in light of the experience of Southern Africa, and concludes his useful discussion by making specific policy recommendations as to how ‘the old edifice of US foreign policy for Africa must be torn down’ (p. 201).

The last chapter in the volume is Timothy M. Shaw’s ‘African foreign policy in the new millennium: from coming anarchies to security communities? From new regionalisms to new realisms?’ Shaw begins by pointing out the objectives of his piece which are ‘to develop an analysis which treats ... transnational relations by examining the “foreign policies” of companies and civil societies as well as those of regimes’ (p. 204), and ‘to inject insights into contemporary African IR and foreign policy derived from different yet parallel fields – such as development studies, International Political Economy (IPE), peacekeeping operations (PKOs) and complex political emergencies
(CPEs)” (p. 206). Drawing on the analysis of the Great Lakes region and other parts of the continent, Shaw concludes, ‘not all the continent is characterised by anarchy, collapse or Afro-pessimism’ (p. 217).

All in all, except for a few obvious defects, the volume is a significant contribution to IR theory and African studies. With the exception of Janis van der Westhuizen’s (pp. 64–81), almost all of the essays in the volume seem to assume that IR theory is monolithic, state-centric; a wrong assumption which seems in turn to have inevitably led the analysts to dispense with the discussion of the relevance (or irrelevance) of IR theories that are not so state-centric. In other words, some schools of IR are omitted. These schools may deserve the omission or exclusion, but the volume would have been more useful if the authors explained why that is the case.

Africa’s Challenge to International Relations Theory is likely to serve as a stepping stone for further investigation and research on the relevance of African issues to International Relations theories, in the light of some unique features in Africa’s international relations. Even as it stands, the volume will therefore be a beneficial reading both for African studies and IR scholars.

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Ghana in Search of Development: the challenge of governance, economic management and institution building by Dan-Bright Dzorgbo

Dzorgbo sets out to give a very personal account of the developmental history of Ghana, assess how the ideology of development has changed over time, present the advantages and problems associated with these choices, and suggest new strategies for national development. He observes that Ghana represents a classic case of the failure of development in Africa, even though it held such high hopes and promise at independence. He examines the neoliberal structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s and early 1990s, in their economic and political conditionality phases. He revisits the controversy that surrounds the appropriateness of the World Bank/IMF neoliberal prescriptions for development in Ghana (Africa), and the opposition to them from such regional institutions as the UN Economic Commission for Africa.

In explaining the failure of development in Ghana, Dzorgbo focuses mainly on the interplay between state politics and socioeconomic development. He explains, in some depth, the nature of the post-colonial state, its mode of interaction with society and how politics put severe limitations on the promotion of development. In effect, therefore, Dzorgbo’s study adopts a state-centric approach to analysis. He justifies his adoption of this approach as due to the paucity of analysis on the Ghanaian state in the literature—a suggestion with which I am inclined to disagree. Dzorgbo argues that country-
specific theorisation of the state is the best way of understanding the developmental role of the state because in his opinion, theories of modernisation, dependency and neo-liberalism have not been particularly helpful. However, he concedes that although the neo-liberal SAPs brought hardships to sections of society, they succeeded in laying a modest foundation upon which future prosperity could be built.

The study purports to examine the importance of the interplay of state politics and socio-economic development, yet Dzorgbo’s thesis deliberately avoids addressing the relationship between democracy and development as part of the general debate on good governance in Ghana. This could be considered a serious flaw as Ghana’s political and developmental experiences, since 1992, have provided some empirical evidence that could be used in testing the hypothesis whether democracy has a positive or negative relationship with development. The foregoing is a poignant point in view of the fact that Dzorgbo concedes that political repression contributed significantly to any successes that were recorded under the SAP.

If this book is intended to review the development history of Ghana, it does so with a degree of success. For instance, the historical analysis of pre-1979 developments benefits from his consultation of the academic literature. However, the narrative on post-1980 developments seems to be very circumscribed in its use of available scholarship on the country in the last two decades. Ghana’s experience with SAPs is one of the areas of political economy that benefited from the surge of academic research since the early 1980s. Yet, most of Dzorgbo’s references on the SAP and its impacts derive from magazines and newspapers. Similarly, the return to constitutional rule in 1992, the events leading up to the swearing-in of a ‘new’ civilian administration, and the creation of a new constitutional order with entirely new institutions, unknown in the governance of the previous decade, receive inadequate assessment in the book.

Dzorgbo concludes his study with a call for a highly state-centred Developmental State, which is rooted in local socio-economic institutions and circumstances. The ‘Directive Principles of State Policy’ that were inserted into the 1992 Constitution created a specific basis for state involvement in development. In addition to this, a practical policy experiment like the National Institutional Renewal Programme which was pursued by the NDC government from 1994, with the hope of altering the public service culture, was part of the efforts by government to create a home-grown, effective state-led development, which contemporary international development theory posits should be put in place in Africa. These are some of essential elements on which Dzorgbo could have rooted his examination of present and future prospects for development in Ghana.

These comments notwithstanding, it is important to give credit to Dzorgbo for attempting an arduous task of summarising the contemporary developmental history of Ghana in one volume. As it stands, the book is likely to be an important introductory history for undergraduate teaching and a quick reference point for those who want to learn about Ghana.

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State Legitimacy and Development in Africa by Pierre Englebert

In this book, Englebert explains how in Africa state capacity, which he defines ‘as the ability of governments to design and implement economic policies for growth and to provide good governance to their societies and markets’ (p. 17), and ultimately economic development, are affected by the level of state legitimacy. In general, this approach, based on a state-cum-market conception of development, seeks to counter the more in-vogue approaches of the 1990s, i.e. social capital and ethnic heterogeneity theories. Although the book places itself within the neoliberal camp, one could talk of Englebert’s model as a ‘French-style’ type of liberalism – i.e. free market and structural adjustment with emphasis on public administration.

The author uses indices to explain and validate his theory. He correlates, above all, every index (of Good Governance, Development Policy and Development Capacity) with the economic growth of African (but also non-African) countries, demonstrating that a positive relationship exists between all those variables. Not happy with the results, he introduces two new factors, the geographic situation and the initial level of income (well documented issues in development literature). The regression analysis allows him to measure the level of dependence between economic growth (dependent variable) and different factors, such as Policies, Governance, Capacity, Geographical Situation, and Initial Income Level, and to distinguish, within the model, the effects of each variable on the level of beloved economic growth.

Chapter 4 replays the often repeated mantra in the literature on the crisis of African governance and its impact on the development, with an additional gibe at African elites, who he claims are ‘inimical to … development’ (p. 44), although Englebert makes some exceptions for Botswana (also a World Bank champion), Mauritius, Lesotho, South Africa, Swaziland, the Seychelles and Cape Verde. Chapter 5 is entirely dedicated to the study of the correlation between state legitimacy and developmental capacity, the former is explained as a determinate structural variable caused by historical events. The conclusion of this section is basically that, in Africa, the state has peculiar characteristics compared to the rest of the world, and every African state is unique even within the purview of the continent as a whole. Thus, distinctions such as benevolent or predatory state become more limiting than useful for development studies. It is the deficit of legitimacy that explains the underdevelopment, without ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ legitimacy the state becomes a veritable anti-economic actor (p. 117). According to this book, vertical legitimacy could improve with the assistance of World Bank intervention in public sector reform, while horizontal ‘legitimate institutions’ could derive from either a territorial redefinition of African political structures, or an institutional redefinition within territorial structures.

The best of Englebert’s book is saved until last when, by proposing that
African states should no longer respect boundaries gained from the colonial era – i.e. the abolition of the principle of *uti possidetis* – the author essentially asserts that to violate this principle constitutes a lesser evil (for development) than having non-legitimate states. The author also advocates, among other things, the legitimisation (or domestication) of warlords inside democratic institutions – ‘turning theft into taxes’.

Englebert’s conclusions certainly require imagination, but the arguments he puts forward are interesting as they place at the centre of the neoliberal debate the importance of the role of the (legitimate) state in generating growth. It is arguable that his book would have been more incisive and caused a greater stir if the gist of his conclusions, which represent the novelty and strength of the book, had been brought to the attention of the reader earlier on. This would have had the benefit of breaking taboos from the start and the reader’s journey would have been all the more intriguing. Although Englebert’s overall viewpoint is within the mainstream, he does have some original points to make, and his book would be a definite asset for graduate level students and researchers interested in current arguments about development issues.

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**From War to Peace on the Mozambique–Malawi Borderland** by Harri Englund


Harri Englund has published a considerable number of articles, primarily situated in Malawi, giving a rare view from below of the rapid political and social change in the first half of the 1990s. This book follows up on the promise of these articles. Its subject matter straddles the Malawian–Mozambican border between Dedza and Ncheu, where the major road south from Lilongwe is actually the border. Those who saw the difference at the time of the Mozambican civil war between the Malawian side – teeming with life – and the Mozambican side – eerily empty except for some destroyed structures – will pick up this book eagerly in an attempt to understand what they saw. They will not be disappointed. Englund clarifies how life goes on when people are refugees. Refugees build on previous social links in their flight; and during their flight, social situations develop that can lead to fundamental changes in their social relations after repatriation. The image of a refugee as a socially totally uprooted person who is repatriated into the original situation to pick up life from there is a simplification. This was especially so in the Dedza–Angonia borderland, as the Mozambican refugees were not herded into camps but settled themselves among the Malawian population. Previous contacts as a result of marriage or trade, or contacts that predated village fission, could be revived – or not, if previous antagonism persisted.
This book is not a rehash of the thesis that African borders are artificial. The border is a reality and Malawian or Mozambican identity is consequential. It has far-reaching consequences for access to land. These general considerations do not, however, do justice to the book, because its main strength is the careful observation of everyday life. Englund has already demonstrated in his description of the reception of the Bishops’ letter in Dedza villages in 1992 that his observations are remarkably free of political stereotypes, and that is the case here as well. For example, Mozambican nationalists in Angonia did not want the Portuguese settlers/traders to leave, and Frelimo and Renamo were united in wishing their return after the war. The relationship between Luis (Frelimo, chairman) and Rafaelo (anti-nationalist; Renamo, village headman) is a prime example of the humanity in his political analysis that cuts through commonplace categories. The humiliation of Luis – balancing on his knees amidst Rafaelo’s goats under threat of Renamo’s guns – in the introduction is in stark contrast to the alliance between Rafaelo and Luis when the war ended and after they had allegedly drunk the villagers’ money in Villa Nuova, the district capital.

Englund shows himself a deft ethnographer in his analysis of kinship. Kinship, however, is a framework within which people reason and not a compelling determinant of behaviour. The case of Rose’s hospitality for Namanyada and Malitina, based on revived awareness of kinship, is moving. Rose is a marginal person, living from the sale of alcohol and chillingly repudiated as being inferior after repatriation (pp. 109–12). And kinship is not the only force that creates solidarity: the failure of Hawadi to build solidarity on the basis of church membership, in contrast to Joji’s successful integration into the community of Jehovah’s Witnesses (Chapter 5) is an example of that. Joji, however, loses his wife in the process, as she is tired of waiting for Armageddon. It is obvious that the casual browser who is not a trained anthropologist can get a lot out of this book. Englund shows himself a better ethnographer than a sociological theorist, however. Some remarks strike a chord, for example his stress on issues or images of moral personhood, which he distinguishes, for example, from common reasoning in terms of client–patron relationships because that reasoning ignores the moral underpinnings of such hierarchical relationships (p. 161). He is slightly polemical here, but one could wish in this case for a more elaborate explanation of what his antagonists say, of what there is in his empirical material that makes him disagree with them, and of the way in which his own position contrasts sharply with theirs. Englund carefully tries to do justice to other people who have written on the region, and he is well read. The result is a blandness that does not capture the reader’s attention. A similar blandness creeps into his theoretical statements because of his desire not to overgeneralise or be deterministic. Statements often simply do not convey much meaning, for example: ‘The patrimonial logic of social capital is viewed through specific power relations. The dynamic of those power relations also undermines any attempt to attribute some inherent and primordial cultural disposition to the patrimonial logic of social capital’ (p. 79). So, power relations are totally contingent, but that does not offer a guide to analysis. While such statements are quickly forgotten, however, the images of Luis and Rafaelo remain long
term and will influence the way in which I look at African local politics in general.

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Contested Power in Angola: 1840s to the present by LINDA HEYWOOD


Angola has too often entered the political science literature as a one-dimensional case introduced to illustrate the effects of Cold War politics in Africa. In such treatments, UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) tends to be represented as a personality cult elevated to high politics by superpower rivalry and the skillful machinations of its charismatic leader, Jonas Savimbi. Now the Cold War is over, Savimbi is dead, Angola is again teetering on the edge of peace, and the old thumbnail sketch of Angolan politics is badly in need of an overhaul. Contested Power in Angola: 1840s to the present, by historian Linda Heywood, offers much that is relevant to the task, and to understanding the burdens of social, economic, and political history that weigh upon it.

To shed light on contemporary Angolan politics, however, is not the primary aim of this book. Contested Power in Angola charts the history of the Ovimbundu people, the largest single ethnic group in Angola and, as it would turn out, the core base of support for UNITA. The book is impressive in both scope and depth, beginning as it does with a survey of political, social, and economic relations within and between the Ovimbundu kingdoms in the nineteenth century, and ending with an epilogue covering the resumption of civil war at the end of 1998. The pages in between provide a nuanced analysis of the shifting policy orientation of the colonial state over the course of the twentieth century, and the resulting social, economic, and political implications for Angolans and particularly the Ovimbundu.

Drawing on an impressive array of documentary evidence as well as personal interviews, the book presents a richly contextualised depiction of the formation, over more than a century, of an Ovimbundu ethnic identity, forged over a succession of colonial policies and post-colonial struggles. While Heywood gives due consideration to the ways in which overall economic conditions and policies shaped the specific ways in which the Ovimbundu experienced colonialism, a great deal of attention is also given to the important legacy of Protestant missionaries in setting the Ovimbundu people apart and helping to create a durable sense of Ovimbundu corporate identity. Throughout, the book returns to the relationship between the Ovimbundu and the state (colonial and post-colonial), and between the Ovimbundu and other dominant ethnic groups within Angola.

Contested Power is not only an important contribution to the slim English language historical record on Angola, it suggests intriguing avenues for comparative research on a number of fronts. For all its broad historic sweep,
this book contains much that should be of immediate interest to anyone concerned with Angola’s future. The last half of the book provides valuable insight into the social basis of UNITA (as well as interesting analysis of the MPLA’s early years in power) that will be useful for scholars and policymakers attempting to move beyond the analysis of ‘key players’ and understand the more enduring foundations of Angolan politics.

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Bound by Tradition: the world of Thabo Mbeki by Lucky Mathebe

Lucky Mathebe, a lecturer at the University of South Africa (UNISA), has written a controversial book about Thabo Mbeki and the ‘narratives’ of Mbeki which the media have popularised over the years. In Bound by Tradition, Mathebe addresses two dominant themes, though a number of sub-themes are also apparent throughout the book. First, he searches for the ‘truth’ about Mbeki with respect to his thinking and approach to matters such as racial identity and nation-building, revolutionary violence, HIV/AIDS and Zimbabwe, and locates his political practice within what he argues to be an invented ‘familial tradition’ of the ANC. Second, in making ample use of journalistic reports, Mathebe identifies (and labels) two contradictory narratives of Mbeki which have been produced by the media. The first is a narrative of Mbeki as ‘Victorian Prince’ (prior to 1994) that emphasised what was believed to be his moderate, liberal and democratic side. This representation disappeared in the post-1994 period, in favour of a second, but more enduring ‘official story’, namely Mbeki as a ‘Machiavellian Prince’. Mathebe’s purpose in the book is to show the continuity in Mbeki’s political thinking and practice, and to criticise media representations which suggest that Mbeki has shifted from ‘Victorian’ to ‘Machiavellian’.

Thus, the book is as much an exploration of Mbeki’s politics and history as it is a critique of how professional journalism makes and sells the news in South Africa. Mathebe highlights the tension between the journalist’s obligation to keep the public informed and politicians in check, whilst having to simultaneously participate in the ruthless and competitive business of selling newspapers and winning the allegiance of readers. This tension is used to explain the increasingly selective integration of themes to construct (and reconstruct) the Mbeki narrative, in accordance with what is avidly described as parochial journalistic interests and particular judgements of newsworthiness. The end products of this kind of news-making are simplistic analyses of the things Mbeki does and says and the construction of partial and misinformed news narratives. Mathebe reiterates (p. 69):

Mbeki’s leadership is primarily a product of the social realities of his context. The role of social inquiry is to locate the historical actor within an understanding of his historical situation and to
explain why he acts the way he does. By focusing primarily on specific elements of his psychology, the journalistic tradition has failed to shed more light on the larger issues which shape the character of his leadership.

Mathebe sets out to ‘shed light’ on these ‘larger issues’ in a careful and deliberate manner. There is detailed commentary and analysis of Mbeki’s thinking on race and identity, ‘Africanness’ and ‘African Renaissance’, as well as illumination of Mbeki’s earlier political involvement and later political track record. In drawing out ‘latent and hidden content’, Mathebe offers a narrative which presents Mbeki as, above all else, a visionary who is bold in his managing of extremely challenging transition processes and who engages in ‘consensus-seeking’ in a manner quite consistent with the institutional traditions of the ANC. The notion of ‘family’ is central to Mathebe’s analysis. It is Mbeki’s adherence to the ‘familial tradition’ and ‘institutional morality’ of the (previously exiled) ANC which leads him to shield ‘members of the family’ from criticism or against charges of corruption and mismanagement. This ‘defensive posture’, according to Mathebe, suggests that Mbeki will frequently be seen to take positions at odds with the ‘common morality’ of South African society, which shapes definitions of socially acceptable values such as transparency, accountability and justice.

While reiterating strongly throughout the book that Mbeki’s leadership and thinking are ‘bound by tradition’, Mathebe refrains from arguing that his political positions and ideas are organised around a core set of values or clear ideological goals. Mbeki’s positions are regarded as adaptable, and he is analysed as essentially ‘an inconsistent leader because he only confronts the specific or concrete problems needing his attention’ (p. 166). Mbeki is described as a pragmatist and it is his pragmatism, together with his open-ended approach and his long-held disenchantment with ideology, that is used to help explain his adoption of the GEAR strategy, his contestation of the TRC findings, his need to open up debate on HIV and AIDS, and his problematic stance on the Zimbabwean land-grab crisis.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the book? The obvious strong points are the well-researched and lucid insights into Mbeki’s history and social context. There is justification for categorising him both as an intellectual and a man ‘bound by traditions’ of the past. Mathebe is also justifiably scathing of superficial readings and partial narratives of Mbeki, which overemphasise his personal and psychological attributes at the expense of the institutional forces which pattern his leadership. Whilst acknowledging these positive elements, there is a strong sense that the author’s admiration for Mbeki leads him to develop an alternative narrative that is more defensive than critical of Mbeki and his leadership. All misgivings, problems and the ‘ruthless stratagems’ associated with Mbeki’s leadership are explained away either in terms of his connectedness to the familial tradition or in terms of the adaptability and open-endedness of his style. The ‘inconsistencies’ and shortcomings of policy decisions (e.g. on Zimbabwe and HIV/AIDS) are treated as illustrations of his ‘quintessential pragmatism’ (p. 188), and consequently not interrogated sufficiently. The internal dynamics of ‘the family’ and the power plays between members, which fascinate journalists and which drive and adapt the ANC ‘traditions’, are not properly probed. And,
whilst attempts are made to present Mbeki in a more nuanced light, few attempts are made to understand the different shades of the media fraternity, nor examine more complex social and political explanations for journalists’ changing relationships with Mbeki and the ANC. Notwithstanding these limitations, *Bound by Tradition: the world of Thabo Mbeki* is a worthwhile read for people wishing to better locate and understand Mbeki and the ANC politically and historically. Mathebe has been successful in his quest to offer new insights into Mbeki’s social context and the institutional constraints structuring his political thinking and pragmatism. He has no doubt made an important contribution to debates on how best to situate and analyse Mbeki’s leadership and on the nature of relationships between politicians and the media.

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**From Guerrillas to Government: the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front** by David Pool


After thirty years of liberation war against successive Ethiopian regimes, Eritrea gained international recognition as an independent state in 1993. The main architect of the liberation struggle was the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), a splinter group of the first liberation movement: the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). During the 1970s and 1980s the EPLF, in tandem with Ethiopian resistance movements, managed to successfully mobilise both peasants and urban intellectuals in a combined military and political campaign against the authoritarian Derg/WPE regime, ending with the military defeat of President Mengistu Haile-Mariam and his escape to Zimbabwe in May 1991. Assuming state power in a country ravaged by war, drought and hunger, the challenges the EPLF faced in 1991 were multifaceted and complex. In this book, David Pool traces the origins and formation of the EPLF and explains how they organised and waged the liberation struggle and how they structured the new state according to their own design and policies.

In Chapter 1, the social, historical and ethnographic context of Eritrea is presented. Chapter 2 discusses the religious and political context of the independence movements, and sheds some light on the background to the splinter group which was later known as EPLF. The formation of the EPLF, from its political component parts to its working as a state-structured front, is discussed in Chapter 3, while Chapter 4 gives an overview of recruitment and organisation of the population into mass-organisations of peasants, youth, women and workers. Chapter 5 presents an outline of the military campaign to liberate Eritrea, and the last chapter, preceding a brief conclusion, discusses the changes in post-independent Eritrea.
Pool draws on information gathered during several visits to Eritrea, both during the time of the struggle and after. He emphasises the state-like qualities of EPLF during the struggle, and argues that the organisation reflected a truly broad-based nationalistic approach to the liberation of Eritrea. However, the positive qualities for a military liberation front do not necessarily bode well for a civilian government, as Pool points out in his last chapter, where he criticises the secretive and totalitarian tendencies of the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) – the renamed EPLF.

Pool presents some new and interesting thoughts on the origins of the Eritrean liberation movements. Moreover, his knowledge about the internal political debates, and confrontations within the EPLF, makes this book interesting in order to fill out some of the lacunae of knowledge about EPLF history. However, the argumentation of the book is weakened by the somewhat unstructured presentation, in the sense that obscure bits and pieces of information – as for instance the obtaining of a certain mechanical tool – are given as much space as important political events. In the same vein, the organisation of the chapters requires a constant shift of historical context which makes it difficult for the uninitiated Eritrea-reader to follow the overall line of argument.

Pool has never hidden the fact that he has been a strong supporter of EPLF’s struggle for Eritrean independence, a view also shared by this reviewer. But supporting a political cause does not necessitate support for a particular political front. Although the book touches upon several critical elements of EPLF organisation and policies, the overall argumentation strives to present EPLF in a positive and constructive manner. Several key problematic issues of EPLF policies past and present – as for instance political prisoners and extra-judicial killings, suppression of rural dissent, and the expansion of a totalitarian state/party structure down to village level – are hardly mentioned. Moreover, the extreme militaristic nationalism of EPLF is only discussed over a couple of pages in the last chapter, a strange priority considering the many conflicts and wars in which post-independent Eritrea has been engaged.

Another weakness of the book is its methodological approach. The author writes that much of the information on which the book is based derives from personal interviews conducted both during the struggle and after. Due to the secretive nature of EPLF, most of the informants wanted to remain anonymous, which is fully understandable. However, the way much of the material is presented – without any reference at all to its origin – makes one sceptical about the validity of some of the claims and hypotheses presented, in particular since many high-ranking EPLF cadres and documents are referred to elsewhere in the book without any source criticism at all. Moreover, several key studies on Eritrean history, society and politics are not consulted or referred to at all, giving the book an impression of a ‘journalistic’ account. More specifically, the book is also flawed by some embarrassing mistakes – such as noting that the Italian colony of Eritrea was established in 1891 (p. 3, correct being 1890). Moreover, several of the works referred to in footnotes are not included in the bibliography.

In spite of its obvious shortcomings, *From Guerrillas to Government* is an important book for students of Eritrean politics and modern history. However,
we have to await future studies to get the authoritative account of the history of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front.

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Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: father, family, food by Michael G. Schatzberg

This is an important and ambitious book which will provoke controversial debates, irrespective of whether one agrees with the author’s conclusions or not. Michael Schatzberg has provided us with a comparative study of the much neglected field of political culture in eight African countries (Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Congo/Zaire, Tanzania, and Kenya). Arguing that the approaches and paradigms of Western dominated social science have for too long obscured the analysis of political power in Africa, he calls for bringing political culture back into the analysis. For how, he convincingly argues, can we understand the increasingly heterogeneous trajectories of African polities without addressing the cultural logic of relations between government and citizen, the duration of political office and succession or the economic expectations of citizens to maintain legitimacy?

The author conceptualises political culture through a ‘moral matrix of legitimate governance’, i.e. the ‘culturally rooted template against which people come to understand the political legitimacy, or “thinkability”, of institutions, ideas, policies, and procedures’ (p. 1). He then goes on to examine the cultural underpinnings of legitimacy as (presumably) reflected in popular discourses and as mirrored in frequently used metaphors and images (food, eating, father, family, etc.). His aim is to demonstrate that their recurrence across a multitude of social and political domains as diverse as politics, religion, literature and sports is grounded in certain common albeit diffuse ‘assumptions about political life’ which guide political behaviour.

Schatzberg’s book is both interesting and fascinating because a wide range of pressing political topics are treated within the overall framework of political culture: representations of power, religion, gender, generation, etc. At times, however, the limits of his analysis become apparent. For example, in one of the most interesting sections of the book (pp. 129–44), he draws on testimonies of former aides to President Mobutu (like Dominique Sakombi) to demonstrate the importance of sorcery in Mobutu’s rule. Yet, he rarely shows in concrete ways how ‘alternative causalities’ like sorcery shape political outcomes or influence the choices made by actors. This reader found himself wishing for more exceptions to this lack of explicit causality, such as the excellent case of the banning of foreign beer in 1976–78. This was seen as a device to bind all beer-consuming Congolese to Mobutu, whose regime had dumped mystical
products into the River Congo and cast a satanic spell on the water used to brew local beer. But this is only a rare instance where an alternative causality is fully spelled out, namely that the decision to ban imported beer might have been taken to oblige ordinary Congolese and political elites alike to consume local beer produced with bewitched water to ensure political loyalty to the president.

A most interesting aspect of the book is Schatzberg’s methodology. The empirical data is primarily based on an interpretative reading of primary sources like pamphlets, speeches and, first of all, articles published in African newspapers. The number of articles digested by the author, from 1980 to the mid-1990s, is impressive. So is the transparency by which he presents his methodology, a fact which becomes more and more noteworthy. Schatzberg’s almost exclusive reliance on state-controlled newspapers to detect frequently used metaphors is however unfortunate. Although he foresees this critique, his methodological defence (pp. 6–7) is not convincing. Since his aim is to discern the ‘common discourse’ (p. 7) on political legitimacy across different social strata, it is hard to see how this can be done by relying on the mouthpieces of a narrow state elite alone. Even if one accepts his premise that the political imagery used by the powerful strikes responsive chords among the population (pp. 13, 23), it remains questionable whether this approach provides him with reliable evidence to measure his theoretical claims.

If the author fails thus to analyse the dialectical nature of legitimacy, he still provides a masterful account of the (discursive) art of constructing political power in Africa. It is no minor merit of the book that it compellingly demonstrates how governments on the continent make recourse to the same or similar metaphors in an effort to legitimise their rule. This ‘official’ albeit implicit line is reflected primarily in the prevalent paternal discourse regarding the president-father and the ‘indivisibility of power’ in Middle Africa. Consequently, the moral matrix raises some important questions about the prospects of democracy in Africa, which are analysed in the excellent final chapter. In it, Schatzberg puts his findings in a historical perspective to conclude that political culture in Africa can be compatible with democratic governance, although not necessarily with its (Western) electoral variant: ‘Legitimacy is “the first step”, not elections’ (p. 209).

Schatzberg has written an innovative and provocative book. Although his methodology is debatable, he critically examines empirical, theoretical and epistemological issues which are highly relevant to the study of African politics. Many readers will certainly agree with the author’s condensed conclusions (about the importance of local faces of power, the ambivalence of electoral democracy, the questioning of fashionable dichotomies like state–civil society, state–church, etc.), even if they reject the means he used to reach them.

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The threads of the prosecution of black males for alleged sexual offences against white women reach to the core of the political, social and economic history of colonial Zimbabwe. Yet for dozens of historians from Van Onselen to Kennedy to Schmidt this issue has at best been worthy of a few pages – an interesting topic in passing. As an historical issue, Black Peril deserved to be given its due. At last, Jock McCulloch has completed the task.

Through a meticulous unearthing of archival documents, McCulloch has constructed a detailed account of Black Peril. To a considerable extent, the author has also examined the broader political context and impact of the phenomenon. In McCulloch’s view, Black Peril is far more than the tragic prosecution of a few black men who happened to be standing outside the wrong window at the wrong time. In a sense, Black Peril cases were political trials, typically taking place at historical moments when the settler population needed a unifying cry. Black Peril ‘offenders’ became a personification of the common enemy that always lurked in settlers’ midst. Perhaps the case of Sam Lewis, described extensively by McCulloch, is the best example. In 1911, Lewis shot and killed a young worker, known only to history as ‘Titus’. Lewis claimed that ‘Titus’ had repeatedly made lewd remarks to his daughters. At Lewis’ trial his counsel argued that when such remarks came from a ‘native’, ‘human nature has its limits’. The all-white jury was impressed with the logic. They acquitted Lewis after ten minutes of deliberations. Ultimately Lewis became a minor folk hero in settler society. The leading newspaper of the day, the Rhodesian Herald, took time to thank him for stemming a tide of lawlessness.

Apart from demonstrating how Black Peril was a vehicle for building white unity, McCulloch also shows how such cases helped to consolidate male supremacy. In the 1920s hundreds of white women joined a campaign to have sexual relations between white men and black women declared illegal. This was a move towards equality, since white women had long been barred from interracial relations. The women’s efforts were blocked. Ironically, a leading woman member of parliament, Elizabeth Tawse-Jollie, rose to defend white males’ sexual rights. The counter-argument presented by John McChlery, that the uprising of 1896 was largely about black men regaining control over black women, carried no weight against the birthright of white males to sexual conquest.

These are but two amongst the array of fascinating case studies that McCulloch effectively presents and analyses. The level of detail is both the greatest strength and part of the shortcoming of Black Peril, White Virtue. For while McCulloch’s evidence is compelling, how much richer the book would have been with a slightly broader scope – one which included comparison and contrast with other societies. Although sexual crime in colonial Zimbabwe is a worthy topic of research on its own, the dynamics are not peculiar to one
country but extend to a range of societies where extreme inequalities prevail. For example, the history of Black Peril in Zimbabwe has much to teach us about the origins and dynamics of the present day international trafficking of women in an epoch of global inequality. Had McCulloch attempted to make a few such linkages, his valuable work would have been even more useful.

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