

The State We're In: Recent Contributions to the Debate on State–Society Relations in Africa

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1. Introduction

In the early 1990s, there was an optimism about Africa not seen since the early years of independence. The end of the Cold War, economic liberalisation, the introduction of democracy in a number of countries and the fall of apartheid in South Africa generated widespread talk of an African renaissance. In the last few years, however, the hopes of an African renaissance seem again to have faded.

In this article I will discuss three different perspectives on political development in Africa in academic literature from the 1990s. The dominant perspective of the 1990s, underlying talk of the African renaissance, can be termed the civil society approach. I will therefore start the discussion by describing the main features of this approach. In addition, I will discuss two dissenting perspectives, which can be termed culturalist and political economy, respectively. Advocates of both these perspectives criticise the civil society approach and the analysis underlying the belief in an African renaissance. The discussion focuses on two representatives of each perspective. As representatives of the civil society approach, I discuss Larry Diamond and Naomi Chazan. From what I call – in the absence of a better term – the culturalist school, I have chosen, first, Jean-Francois Bayart and, second, Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz. Finally, the political economy approach is represented by Catherine Boone and Mahmood Mamdani.

Any such classification of schools of thought and selection of representatives will to some extent be arbitrary. Without doubt, I could have chosen other schools of thought, or other representatives of each school. Moreover, comparison of different theories and

approaches can be difficult, since different writers do not always address the same issues. To some extent therefore, their comparability is an analytical construct. However, I think that the contributions I have chosen have been among the most important and widely discussed from the last decade.

Following the above classification, the article has four parts, in addition to this introduction. In the first three parts, I review the selected contributions from each of the three broad perspectives. In the last, concluding section, I sum up the discussion, and point to some key issues which are left largely unanalysed by all the reviewed approaches.

2. The Civil Society Perspective

In an article in the *Journal of Modern African Studies* in 1990, which reviewed different perspectives on the African state, Martin Doornbos concluded by pointing out what he saw as a new trend, which had just started emerging (Doornbos, 1990). In contrast to other approaches, such as the modernisation school and dependency theory, this new trend drew attention to the non-state sphere in African countries.

It is interesting how yesterday's innovations become today's orthodoxies. Ten years after the publication of Doornbos' article, it seems strange indeed that the focus on civil society and on non-state actors could appear as a novelty. If there has been a single dominant theme in the debate of the 1990s, it has been the role of civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Some of the representatives of the civil society perspective include Naomi Chazan, Larry Diamond, Michael Bratton, Goran Hyden, Donald Rotchild, Victor Azarya and John Harbeson. In this discussion, I will mainly use key contributions by Larry Diamond and Naomi Chazan (Diamond, 1988; Chazan, 1994). Both these authors are central contributors to this school of thought. Chazan has published several books and articles on the political development of Ghana as well as more general contributions on African political development. Diamond has been the leader of a series of research projects on democracy in the third world, with separate volumes published on Africa, Asia and Latin America. While he is not an 'Africanist' his contributions have been influential in African studies and in development studies more broadly.

Larry Diamond's main aim is to explain the weakness of democratic regimes in Africa. The main obstacles to democratisation, he

argues, are the wide-ranging state regulations of and control over the economy. Due to its control over the main sources of wealth, the state has been able to prevent the emergence of a strong and autonomous bourgeoisie, separate from the state. The bourgeoisie is seen as the natural agent of democracy, both because the establishment of democracy is perceived to be in its interest, and because the values and liberal ideology associated with this class promote democracy. This, incidentally, is also the explanation favoured by both modernisation-theorists (such as Lipset), and by Barrington Moore in his book *Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship* (Moore, 1966). It is summed up in Moore's famous slogan, 'No bourgeoisie, no democracy'.

A strong middle class, the argument goes, forms the basis of a strong civil society, and this is crucial for the functioning of liberal democracy. In the absence of such a class in Africa, the pressure for the expansion of democratic rights and the limitation of state power has been weak. This explains the weakness of democracy in Africa up until the 1990s.¹

The state, in short, is seen as the source of the problem, and it must be reformed in order to 'liberate' civil society from the stranglehold of regulation and inefficiency. It follows from this analysis that the solution to the problems experienced in Africa is liberal reforms of the type advocated by the World Bank. This would reduce the economic role of the state and remove the link between class formation and access to state resources. When such reforms are institutionalised, a strong and autonomous middle class will emerge, and this in turn will lead to pressure for democratisation.

Chazan, although her approach is similar to Diamond's in many ways, does not focus on the relationship between the state and dominant classes. Instead, she focuses on the emergence of popular organisations. Like Diamond, Chazan believes that the prospects of democracy in Africa are quite bright. Unlike him, however, she does not mainly base her optimism on economic liberalisation, but on the emergence of a large number of voluntary associations. These associations, she hopes, will form the basis of an emerging civil society.

Chazan notes that not all voluntary associations are part of civil society. Civil society, she argues, is characterised by formal organisations, which are both independent from and directly related to the

1 This is a point made by a number of scholars within the civil society perspective. See Bratton (1994) for a particularly clear statement.

state. Some of the associations found in Africa, however, do not confront – or even relate to – the state at all, and some are too parochial and particularistic to be considered part of civil society. What we see in Africa, therefore, is a nascent civil society, or a civil society in the making.

The emergence of voluntary organisations is partly seen as resulting from the rolling back of the state associated with neoliberalism, which has led to a kind of withdrawal of the state from many parts of society. The flourishing of associations, Chazan argues, is a reflection of the state's curtailment of services, or what she calls its 'dissociation from society'. The vacuum created by this disengagement has enabled private organisations to grow stronger. As the state has become unable or unwilling to provide services for its citizens, people have found other, private solutions. And once established, Chazan argues, these organisations will constitute an alternative site of power, independent from the state. They can then balance and limit the power of the state, and act as pressure groups for democratisation.

Both Diamond and Chazan focus on internal causes of political developments. In so far as they consider external factors, the focus is on how external support for political and economic reform can strengthen civil society and democracy. They view the character of the state as the main cause of economic decline and the prevalence of patrimonialism. The latter, they argue, is the result of excessive state regulation of the economy. Such regulation has meant that access to positions in the state has become the main means of economic accumulation. Those in control of the state have therefore used public resources for personal accumulation, thereby undermining both state capacity and economic development.

There are many objections that could be raised against this perspective. First, it relies on an oppositional model of state–society relations, similar to that of the old modernisation school of the 1960s. This interpretation does not address the fact that democratisation, as it has taken place in Africa, has rarely been the result of internal pressure from society. Instead, democracy has largely been introduced from 'above', through an alliance of state officials and international donors, perhaps influenced by ideologues such as Diamond.

At a more theoretical level, the unquestioned assumption concerning the role of the middle class in the promotion of democracy is far more complex than indicated here. As shown by Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992) the working class is the class that most consistently favours democratisation, while the

attitude of the middle class towards democracy varies considerably.

Furthermore, those countries that have succeeded in late industrialisation have never been liberal and non-interventionist. Thus, in the only examples of late industrialisation since the Second World War, the so-called newly industrialised countries (NICs) in East Asia, the state has been far more activist and interventionist than the neoliberal model prescribes.²

The role of voluntary associations (NGOs) in democratisation is also much more ambiguous than this perspective allows for. NGOs are not always very democratic. Both their internal organisation and the means they adopt to acquire funding or solicit government support may in fact be quite undemocratic. Nor are they necessarily independent from the state. Indeed, the African experience shows that many of the organisations constituting Chazan's flourishing civil society are not much more than consultancy firms, set up by people associated with – sometimes even employed by – the state, in order to gain access to donor funds earmarked for civil society and so-called grassroots organisations. In other words, they are neither as grassroots nor as non-governmental as they appear. Indeed, even the World Bank refers to many of them as GONGOs (government-organised NGOs) and even BONGOs (bank-organised NGOs). Since these new voluntary organisations are not always autonomous, they will not necessarily serve as a counterforce to the state and as a guarantee for democracy.

One example from my own research in Kigoma, Tanzania, may illustrate that actually existing voluntary organisations may not be quite the civil society idealised by Diamond and Chazan (Eriksen, 2000). As a result of the decline of police capacity to maintain law and order, local militias or defence teams, called *sungusungu*, were established in many parts of Tanzania. The stated aim of the *sungusungu* was to prevent crime. This was done by patrolling, investigating crimes, arresting criminals and punishing the culprits if and when they were caught.

The *sungusungu* in Kigoma shared offices with the ward administration, and cooperated with them in collecting bribes and using threats to force people to pay for their protection. Rather than challenging or confronting the state politically, the *sungusungu* competed with the corrupt police force for bribes, sometimes in collaboration with other government officials. In other words, the *sungusungu* are

2 This latter point has now been acknowledged by liberals as well, even within the World Bank. See, for instance, World Development Report (1997).

neither independent of the government nor substantially different from it in their mode of operation.

Finally, at a normative level, Diamond's and Chazan's perspective represents a kind of teleological liberalism, in which a market economy and political democracy appear as the goals towards which all countries move. Any obstacles to this natural movement are understood as 'blockages', which hinder what would otherwise be the 'natural' course of development. Thus, it is presupposed that once state regulations have been removed, a new autonomous middle class and organisations independent of existing social structures will emerge spontaneously. In this sense, their perspective is a true heir to modernisation theory. What differs is merely the location of blockages. Whereas modernisation theorists saw 'tradition' and the primordial character of local institutions as the main block to 'development', civil society theorists see the state as the principal obstacle.

Curiously, however, the values ascribed to state and society respectively have been reversed. While modernisation theorists saw the state as a rational instrument of modernisation, and society as inherently 'backward' and 'irrational', the new civil society theorists advocate the mobilisation of civil society against the irrational and ineffective state. In both cases, however, state and society are seen as fundamentally opposed.

Whatever view one may take of the state, however, civil society is not a sphere of pure freedom, where power struggles and exploitation are absent. Suffice it here to mention the authoritarian power of chiefs, elders or clan leaders, and the exploitative relations found within the market economy that liberals seek to promote. The identification of the state with oppression, and of civil society with freedom and democracy, therefore obscures more than it reveals.

3. The Culturalist Perspective

Two recent contributions, which are in self-conscious opposition to the civil society paradigm, are those of Jean-Francois Bayart, and Patrick Chabal and Jean Pascal Daloz. Bayart's book, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (1993), is one of the most influential books on African politics in recent years. Reacting against modernisation theory ('a disastrous notion') and dependency theory ('a fairy tale'), as well as against the fashionable ideology of civil society, he sets out to analyse African politics in what he calls, following Braudel, the *longue durée* of political development.

Bayart's argument is highly complex, and at times almost impene-

trable. Not surprisingly, it is also impossible to summarise briefly. Nevertheless, some key issues can be identified. Most fundamentally, Bayart's programme is to interpret African politics in its own terms, rather than through an application of concepts and theories from Western philosophy. The latter strategy, he argues, has been characteristic of modernisation theory, Marxism and neoliberalism alike, and in Bayart's opinion, it results in African politics being seen merely in terms of what it lacks in comparison with Western countries, rather than in terms of what is actually happening in Africa.

His own alternative is to focus on the internal dynamics of African politics, and on the continuity across the dividing lines of colonisation and decolonisation. Bayart seeks to develop an approach that interprets politics from below – from the perspective of Africans themselves. African politics, he argues, must be seen as reflecting the distinct characteristics of African society. Thus, the key to understanding the state is to understand the African *governmentality* (to use a term from Foucault), or the attitude of Africans towards power and politics.

The African state, Bayart argues, has become 'domesticated', or appropriated by society. By this he means that despite the existence of formal institutions that are more or less copies of state institutions found in the West, the state's actual operation is determined by the character of African society. Political actors regularly break the state's formal rules by following a logic emerging from society.

African politics, he argues, are characterised by what he calls 'the reciprocal assimilation of elites'. By this he means the integration of potentially competing elites into a single dominant class, defined by its access to and control over state resources. This assimilation has made the state an integrative force in society. Ethnic leaders, civil servants, state and private sector elites collaborate with each other in order to profit as best they can from their control over the state and its resources.

To uphold the patronage networks on which the process of elite assimilation is based, the state must acquire resources. One of the most important ways to acquire resources has been through dealings with the external world. This is what Bayart calls *extraversion*. African politicians have become experts at manipulating international organisations, foreign governments and aid agencies. Resources acquired in these dealings and through such devices as trade policies, export taxes and the manipulation of exchange rates, have funded the reciprocal assimilation of elites through the use of patronage.

According to Bayart, boundaries between the private and the

public, and between state and society, are rarely recognised in African politics. The regular neglect of such boundaries Bayart calls *straddling*. The informal, it should be noted, should not be equated with the traditional. In line with his emphasis on historicity, Bayart sees African society as continually changing, adapting itself in creative ways to new conditions. Also, he makes clear that the sphere of the informal is far from idyllic. Greed, exploitation, corruption and violence are at least as prevalent as community and solidarity.³

Another important contribution, which shares many points with Bayart, is Patrick Chabal and Jean Pascal Daloz' book from 1999, *Africa Works*. Like Bayart, they emphasise the importance of the informal. The African state, they argue, has never been emancipated from society. Since independence, the state has gone through a process of de-institutionalisation, which has now reached a stage where the formal institutions are little more than an empty shell, within which informal activities take place.

This process, which they call 'the instrumentalisation of disorder', is beneficial, they argue, both for those who control the state and for ordinary people. In such a system, everyone has access to some state resources, since everyone is someone's client. People's expectations of the state, they argue, are not based on a wish for formalisation and differentiation. Instead, they want those in control of the state to distribute its resources to their clients. Thus, citizens seek to hold leaders accountable not by formal institutions such as democracy, but by ensuring that the state distributes resources in what is seen as a fair way. However, (like Bayart) Chabal and Daloz realise that economic development is incompatible with such a state, and they make it quite clear that they do not think development of this kind is likely to take place.

The implication of this analysis, spelt out more clearly by Chabal and Daloz than by Bayart, is that the African state depends on patronage and the distribution of spoils to maintain its legitimacy. 'The legitimacy of the African elite, such as it is, derives from their ability to nourish the clientele on which their power rests... It is therefore imperative for them to exploit government resources for patrimonial purposes' (Chabal and Daloz, 1999:15). And if political survival depends on distribution of spoils, policies that reduce the access to resources to be used for such purposes are not likely to be supported.

3 Thus, those looking for a rosy picture of the informal, based on authentic community and solidarity, are likely to be disappointed by Bayart's analysis.

Although Bayart and Chabal and Daloz make a number of important points, there are some major problems with their approach. First and foremost, they actually say very little about the state. They give a vivid picture of informal networks, of elite assimilation and of how elites use state institutions for private purposes. At the same time, the precise characteristics of state institutions, and their relationship to society, remain unclear.

Second, and related to this, little is said of the precise relationship between the formal and the informal. As a result, the account tends towards a kind of reductionism, in which the state is ultimately reduced to an arena of informal political struggle. While it is true that such formal institutions operate in different ways in Africa than in Europe, it cannot simply be assumed that the ‘real’ character of African states is found in the ‘informal’ or ‘traditional’, and that the formal and modern aspects of the state are of no importance.

For example, despite the incomplete institutionalisation of citizenship, it is striking to what extent state institutions at all levels – rural as well as urban – invoke the language of citizenship, even if their practice does not correspond to it. Appeals are invariably made to ‘rights’, ‘popular participation’ and ‘the nation’ when state action is legitimised. In doing this, state officials seek to affirm the state’s institutions as the legitimate domain of political and legal authority.

This means that the existence of formal institutions does make a difference, because even if their rules are not followed by everybody all the time, or even most of the time, some people actually follow them, and even those who do not follow formal rules are likely to take them into account when making their choices and decisions.

Third, although the informal aspects of African politics, and the blurring of boundaries between the private and the public are important, it is equally striking to note the ways in which state and society in Africa are entirely separate from each other, compared to the situation in Western states. An adequate account of the African state must include both the nature of *links* between state and society and the forms of *separation* between them. The fact that the modern state is incompletely institutionalised in Africa means that it is both more closely linked to and more separated from society. One example of weak links between the two is the limited inability of African states to tax their population, and more generally, their weak administrative capacity. The result of this weakness is that much of social life in Africa, especially in the rural areas, is in practice largely outside the reach of state administration.

Fourth, the emphasis on continuity from pre-colonial times to the

present makes it difficult to account for variation across time and space. Political practice is not the same now as in the 1960s or under colonialism. Nor for that matter is it obvious that events in Liberia and in Botswana have that much in common. Within the context of the *longue durée*, the changes that have taken place both during colonialism and after independence are lost from view, and both colonisation and independence appear as insignificant historical parentheses. Although Bayart's and Chabal and Daloz' emphasis on continuity is important, it needs to be complemented with an understanding of historical change.

Finally, at a normative level, both Bayart and Chabal and Daloz come across as almost celebrating the ability of Africans to subvert formal institutions. Thus, even the most outrageous greed and plundering appear almost as acts of resistance to the imposition of Western institutions, rather than as crude exploitation. In this respect, they are clearly – Bayart in particular – inspired by postmodernist theory, with its celebration of resistance and subversion. Both books therefore come close to asserting that the African state works well, on its own terms, and that the inability of most scholars to see this is simply a result of applying standards that are alien to Africans themselves. Such an implicit cultural relativism is clearly problematic.

4. The Political Economy Approach

The third approach I want to discuss can be termed 'institutionalist' or 'political economy'. It should be noted here that the term political economy is used in a non-reductionist way, and does not refer either to neo-classical political economy or to that implied in most versions of Marxism. Its key feature is the focus on structural aspects of state–society relations, and on the historical origin of the African state. As representatives of this approach, I have chosen Mahmood Mamdani and Catherine Boone. Both these writers seek to explain political development in Africa by focusing on the state's relationship with rural society. In his book *Citizen and Subject* (1996) Mamdani seeks to establish an approach that avoids both the evolutionary ethnocentrism of civil society theories and Bayart/Chabal/Daloz's emphasis on historical continuity.

In order to understand political development in Africa, he argues, it is necessary to analyse the specific forms of power established by the state during colonialism. The key feature of the colonial state, Mamdani argues, was what he calls its 'bifurcation'. In order to impose its control in Africa, the colonial state was forced to establish

a dual system of government. In this system, the form of state power in urban areas was fundamentally different from that in rural areas. In urban areas, modern institutions and something similar to Western civil society were established, and power was legitimised in the universal language of rights. Here, the public domain of the state was separated from the private domain of society. The private domain consisted of citizens, whose rights were upheld and guaranteed by the state. In other words, the state was clearly separated from society. Crucially, although it was far from democratic, state authority was exercised directly, without intermediaries.

In rural areas, by contrast, state power was exercised through traditional leaders acting as intermediaries in a system of indirect rule. This system involved the co-optation of traditional authorities into the state, making them the key element of state power at the local level. The colonial state codified ‘tradition’, and made it the basis of its rule. By using a selective interpretation of tradition as the basis of state policies, tradition became objectified. The concrete institutionalisation of this form of power was customary law, according to which chiefs were required to rule in accordance with the established traditions of the tribe. Claiming that each tribe had its own customs, colonial powers created a different set of customary laws for each tribe, and a separate authority to enforce each set of laws. In this system, no civil society with autonomy from the state was created, and inhabitants of rural areas became subject to state rule without being able to participate in the institutions of government. In Mamdani’s terms, they became ‘subjects’ rather than ‘citizens’.

Since independence, Mamdani argues, African states have deracialised urban civil society, by abolishing laws that discriminated between urban residents on the basis of colour. In rural areas, states have followed one of the following two main strategies. Some have more or less retained the system of customary law and indirect rule established during colonialism, thus reproducing what Mamdani calls decentralised despotism. Others have sought to dismantle the colonial system, but the result has been to replace the decentralised despotism of colonialism with the centralised despotism of the central state. In both systems, the rural population has remained subjects rather than citizens. By implication, reforming a power that institutionally enforces tension between town and country, and between ethnicities, is the key issue for democratic reform in Africa.

In contrast to Bayart’s book, I think that the main value of Mamdani’s contribution lies in its overall perspective. The focus on the ways in which state–society relations were structured during

colonialism and on the implications of this for the postcolonial state seems fundamentally correct. By highlighting the specificity of the African experience, it avoids both denying the impact of modern institutions and the simple projection of an idealised Western notion of the state onto Africa.

But although his overall approach is fruitful, the content of some of his claims is nevertheless problematic. First, although it is important to recognise the importance of colonialism for subsequent political development, there is in Mamdani's account a tendency to overestimate the strength and impact of state institutions, both during colonialism and after. As both Bruce Berman (1998) and Jeffrey Herbst (2000) have recently argued, the ability of the colonial state actually to regulate people's behaviour was extremely limited. Indeed, the system of indirect rule can be seen as an expression of such state weakness. Much of social life remained outside the range of state regulations during colonialism, and the same remains the case today. Using Michael Mann's term, we can say that African society has not been 'caged in' by the state (Mann, 1993). This illustrates the point mentioned above in the discussion of Chabal and Daloz's book: Although it is important to analyse the ways in which state and society have been intertwined, it is equally important to recognise the ways in which they have remained separated.

Second, it is not obvious that civil society in urban areas was or is as developed as Mamdani's account indicates. Colonial civil society, of course, was extremely narrow, as it was confined to the settler community, excluding native urban residents. Since independence, the prevalence of patronage and the use of informal networks indicate that the boundaries between state and society and between the public and the private have never been clearly established. Moreover, the associations found in urban civil society are often quite closely tied up with the state.

Third, Mamdani also makes a point of contrasting the European experience of state formation with that in Africa. African state formation, he argues, was the result of conquest, while European states emerged from society in a more organic way. What seems to underlie Mamdani's analysis on this point is the idea that European state formation was somehow more natural, while the African process was artificial. His account ignores the extent to which European state formation, too, was largely a result of conquest and violence. This has been convincingly shown by authors such as Michael Mann (1993) and Charles Tilly (1985).

In her book *Merchant Capital and the Roots of State Power*

in Senegal and a series of articles, Catherine Boone seeks to explain political development by focusing on the rural basis of African states, and on how the state's links to rural society have conditioned its policies (Boone, 1992, 1994, 1998).⁴ Her main idea is that, in Africa, there has been a contradiction between the economic and the political imperatives faced by the state. In this situation, concern for economic development has continuously been subordinated to political imperatives and the need to maintain political control. After all, preservation of regime power – and ultimately state power itself – is likely to be given the highest priority. Under such conditions, she argues, development, in political as well as economic terms, is unlikely to take place.

Like Mamdani's, Boone's starting-point is the system of indirect rule established during colonialism. As the most important clients of the colonial state, chiefs were the most powerful patrons in rural society. They therefore became the focus of local patronage networks. This system made the state and local leaders dependent on each other. The most important political relationship in this system was the alliance between the European district administrator and the local chief.

At independence, African states were faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, the economic interests of society as a whole were best served by pushing accumulation and establishment of capitalist relations of production. On the other hand, this would entail large-scale disruption of African societies, something that could undermine the maintenance of law and order, and state control over its territory. In this situation, most states chose not to attempt full-scale transformation of agriculture through complete privatisation of ownership.

Instead, they sought to maintain control by expanding existing patronage networks. The resources required to sustain such networks were appropriated partly through control over external trade and donor funds, and partly through indirect taxation of peasants by means of marketing boards or similar arrangements. In the latter, peasants were forced to sell their crops at prices fixed by the state at levels lower than market prices, so that the state could earn a profit when crops were resold. But when peasants started avoiding selling their crops to the state, this source of income dried up, and the state had to resort increasingly to external aid and borrowing from abroad. Boone sums up her argument in the following way:

4 Here, I mainly draw on Boone (1994 and 1998).

The private appropriation of state resources and the use of state funds to strengthen personalistic power networks ... lay at the very heart of the processes through which postcolonial regimes were consolidated and by which they sought to govern... Over time, however, the same process has weakened the state as an instrument for organising, exercising and reproducing state power (Boone, 1994:131–132).

Clearly in its emphasis on rural state–society relations, this analysis has certain elements in common with Mamdani. Both point to the inheritance of indirect rule and to the resulting fragility of state power in the countryside. However, in Boone’s analysis, the focus is more on rural relations of production than on the reproduction and reconstruction of customary law. Since these countries are overwhelmingly rural, the state is economically dependent on peasants. But by squeezing the peasantry economically in order to sustain patronage networks, the economic foundations of the state were undermined.

Thus, Boone agrees with Bayart and Chabal/Daloz that patronage networks are the main means through which African states have been able to maintain a degree of stability and control. Moreover, it is a key point in her analysis that in this process, the state has undermined its own economic base for the sake of political survival.

This seems to me a very convincing analysis, as far as it goes. At the same time, like Mamdani’s account, it leaves some issues unexplained. For one thing, not all states have been economically dependent on the peasantry. In mineral-exporting states, such as Angola or Nigeria, the state has not been dependent on taxation of peasants. Moreover, as shown by Bayart and others, relations with the outside world have been crucial for the funding of many African states. This is not emphasised by Boone. Also, Boone does not account for the modern, or universalistic aspects of African states, such as the role of bureaucracy, the continued appeal to modern notions of citizenship and the official commitment to the ideology of development. Finally, the point highlighted by Mamdani – the manipulation and codification of custom during colonialism – is not analysed.

5. Concluding Remarks

To conclude this discussion: First, I think that the civil society perspective has little value in terms of improving our understanding of political developments in Africa. This does not mean that it is unimportant, however. Far from it. In addition to being predominant

in academic writings, this perspective has in fact significantly influenced real events in Africa. Thus, donors, governments and other actors have to a large extent accepted this analysis, and designed their policies on the basis of it.

The combination of analytical weakness and practical impact, I suggest, makes it reasonable to treat this perspective mainly as data rather than as a tool of analysis – as a category of practice rather than as a category of analysis. As such, it constitutes an interesting example of the interrelationship between theories on the one hand and the objects to which they refer on the other. On the one hand, it shows that the development of theories is affected by events in the real world. The widespread acceptance of neoliberalism in the social-scientific community no doubt reflected the general dominance of neoliberal ideology after the end of the Cold War.

On the other hand, by shaping the world views and the self-understanding of actors, social-scientific theories in turn contribute to changing social reality. This is so even if theories are wrong, in the sense of not corresponding to how the world really is. Theories can alter people's perceptions and action, sometimes even creating the phenomena they are about. By acting on the basis of theories (true or false), the state and other actors change the existing state of affairs, perhaps also altering the distribution of resources between groups. If policies are developed on the basis of false assumptions, they may in turn shape the perceptions and actions of those affected by them. In this sense, the effects of false theories may be as important as the effects of true ones.⁵

Second, I think the contributions of Bayart's and Chabal and Daloz include a number of valuable points. They highlight the ways in which the domains of the public and the private are blurred; that civil society, in the sense of a separate sphere, independent of the state, does not exist, and that the use of patronage is the main way in which the state has been able to maintain some sort of control. Still, their approach is ultimately problematic, most notably in its excessive emphasis on the informal, and its neglect of how formal state institutions also contribute to shaping the character of the state and of political practice.

Thus, in my opinion, a political economy framework, understood in a non-reductionist way, represents the best overall approach to the study of state–society relations in Africa. Such an approach,

5 See, for instance, Ranger (1983) on how the colonial state's ethnic classifications came to help constitute ethnic identities in Zimbabwe.

which Michael Mann has called a ‘marxified weberianism’ (Mann, 1993), makes it possible to grasp the specific character of relations between state and society, and to analyse them in their historical context.⁶ Moreover, it is compatible and can be combined with some of the insights from what I have called the culturalist tradition, such as the importance of the informal, of continuities across the divide of independence and of the fluidity of boundaries between state and society.

By way of a conclusion, I would like to point out a couple of issues that have been inadequately dealt with by all three perspectives. The first point is a methodological one.

I think studies of African politics could benefit from joining the recent attempts at combining approaches from anthropology and political science. Following Joel Migdal (1994), I would argue that the study of the state would benefit from adopting an approach that examines what he calls the ‘anthropology of the state’. The traditional macro-oriented analysis of political science can only be enriched by impulses from anthropology, with its emphasis on micro-level data collected in ‘the field’. Although ‘the state’ cannot be ‘observed’ directly when doing fieldwork, it has an institutional presence at multiple levels in society, and these concrete institutions should be studied through the use of fieldwork. But the state is also a translocal phenomenon, and analyses of the state based on fieldwork would therefore need to combine the use of data collected in ‘the field’ with theories and concepts from traditional macro-level approaches. Thus, one should move beyond the analyses of formal rules and structures, in order to get ‘inside the whale’, and grasp the processes of everyday state making. At the same time, the conceptual apparatus and the macro-focus of the political science tradition must be retained.

This implies a rejection of the dominant epistemological orientations in both anthropology and political science. On the one hand, the emphasis on figures, numbers and formal structures found in much political science literature is rejected, because it fails to pay attention to the concrete mechanisms through which state power is produced and exercised. Since such mechanisms do not lend themselves to representation in the form of numbers and figures, they tend to be considered as somehow not ‘real data’, and are simply neglected. On the other hand, anthropologists’ ‘metaphysics of pre-

6 Mamdani could be considered a ‘marxified weberian’ in Mann’s sense, while Boone might perhaps be better described as a ‘weberified marxist’.

sence’, in which face-to-face relations are given epistemological privilege, is also rejected. As stated by Akhil Gupta (an anthropologist), one must question ‘the assumption regarding the natural superiority – the assertion of authenticity – implicit in the knowledge claims generated by “being there”’ (Gupta, 1995: 376).

The second point concerns the role of external factors. To be sure, it is true that international pressure has affected or even driven processes of economic and political liberalisation (as pointed out by the neoliberals), that developments in the world market have been unfavourable to African countries and that economic links with the outside world have been important for sustaining the patronage networks on which ruling regimes depend.

At the same time, as pointed out by Jackson and Rosberg (1983), it is also important that international recognition and participation in the system of states has enabled African states to survive, in spite of limited real control and at times extreme weakness. This points to the close interrelationship between a particular state and the system of states of which it is a part. A given state is not an object, constituted prior to its relations with other states. It does not first exist and then interact with other states. As Giddens says: ‘International relations are not connections set up between pre-established states, which could maintain their sovereign power without them, they are the basis upon which the nation state exists at all’ (Giddens, 1985: 263–264). And by representing ‘its’ society in relationship with other states, a given state gains autonomy and strength in relation to its society.

At a more concrete level, as pointed out by Boone, Bayart and others, states defined as poor, or in need of help, gain access to substantial economic resources from outside. This flow of resources is nevertheless ambiguous for the process of state-building. In the short run, the availability of aid may strengthen the state in relation to society and improve its chances of political survival. In the long run, however, it may also prevent the state from developing its administrative capacity and ability to raise revenue. Moreover, since access to external funds is tied to specific conditions, it makes the state accountable to external donors rather than to its own population. Such a shift in lines of accountability clearly undermines democracy.

Moreover, the role of warfare in state-building is not mentioned in any of the theories discussed. As shown by Thomas Ertman (1997), Michael Mann (1993), Charles Tilly (1985) and others, state-building has been intimately linked to warfare. Inter-state war (or threats of it) forces governments to increase revenue collection. At

the same time it also increases the population's willingness to comply. This is not to suggest that what Africa needs is more wars, or that what is needed is inter-state wars, rather than civil wars. However, it illustrates the extraordinary difficulties of state-building, and the extremity of the conditions that have made it possible elsewhere.

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