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Questioning Africa as analytical category**

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ABSTRACT

This article presents three elements that intend to explain scholarly generalizations about Africa. It begins by noting that excessive reliance on statistical analysis might account for much *enthusiastic* literature on the continent that makes generalizations with little theoretical backing. It then points to flaws within current discussions of State performance (i.e. State fragility) and its measurement, and suggests that this concept serves to explain a quite relaxed approach to the "African State problem" that ignores causes, intensities and logistical relations. The article concludes by describing how the widespread use of a utilitarian rationality to explain African realities creates an illusion of neatness in comparative politics that leaves out some seminal information that exceeds the model's analytical parameters.

Keywords: Africa, generalization, social mechanisms, rational maximization.

RESUMEN

En este artículo se presentan tres mecanismos que explican las generalizaciones académicas sobre África. En primer lugar, destaca un exceso de confianza en el análisis estadístico que podría explicar la existencia de un tipo de literatura ingenua pero entusiasta que realiza generalizaciones sin una sólida fundamentación teórica. Luego, examina el vacío en las discusiones sobre el desempeño del Estado (fragilidad estatal) y su forma de medición; el artículo sugiere que dicho vacío explica una aproximación bastante relajada al "problema del Estado Africano" que ignora causas, intensidades y relaciones logísticas. En la parte final, describe cómo el extendido uso de la racionalidad utilitarista para explicar la realidad africana, crea una ilusión de precisión en la política comparada que deja por fuera información seminal que "no encaja" en el modelo.

Palabras clave: África, generalización, mecanismos sociales, maximización racional.

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** I shall use Africa instead of Sub-Saharan Africa to simplify redaction. I thank Phillomen Nakyazze for corrections and comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

Some predictions were based on far-fetched arithmetical calculations, involving the figures of the year, the total of deaths, and the number of months the plague had so far lasted. Others made comparisons with the great pestilences of former times, drew parallels (which the forecasters called “constants”), and claimed to deduce conclusions bearing on the present calamity. But our most popular prophets were undoubtedly those who in an apocalyptic jargon had announced sequences of events, any one of which might be construed as applicable to the present State of affairs, and was abstruse enough to admit of almost any interpretation.

The plague, Albert Camus

“Generalization about Africa has rendered a great disservice to African development”. A well known policy advisor in Uganda made this remark during an open discussion about “African politics”¹ which I had with him. While undertaking research on East African politics and having already reviewed various literature, it was apparent the African-wide approach had largely ignored social mechanisms and research areas that I considered fundamental in explaining developments within the political arena in that part of Africa. From time to time I found myself reading with derision grandiose generalizations and pieces of arguably flawed policy advice emanating from various sources. I perceive a series of structural problems in the approach taken by different analysts in their attempt to understand issues regarding African political problems and thus tempted to suggest that Africa as such may not constitute a satisfactory unit of analysis from the political point of view. With only few exceptions,² most of the studies using Africa as their analytical framework failed to deduce concrete proven final explanations³ of the underlying problems to what seems a vicious cycle of political mayhem in various countries on the African continent. It was during the conversation with the policy advisor that it struck me on the need to urgently undertake research to unearth reasons why scholars still insist on producing scholarly material about “Africa” that largely seems to be inconclusive and/or significantly flawed.

¹ I thank this and other valuable comments to Mr. Charles Lwanga Ntale.

² See for instance Mamdani’s outstanding works on the Bifurcated State in Africa (*Citizen and Subject*: 1996), and the analysis on the Post-colonial dynamic of exclusion of Subject classes and political identities (*Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities*: 2001).

³ By final explanations I take those that we perceive as “evident” in the psychological sense or testable in the empirical way. Boudon (1996).

The present study therefore seeks to offer triple answers to question: Why do scholars produce scholarly material about African political aspects which seems to be largely inconclusive and/or significantly flawed? It begins by annotating apparently excessive confidence attached to statistical analysis that might account for the overly enthusiastic literature characterized by political generalizations with little theoretical support about political trends in Africa. The study then points to the existing gagged discussions on State performance (State fragility) and how this is measured. The article then suggests that this gag serves to explain a quite relaxed approach to the “African State problem” that ignores causes, intensity and logistical implications. In the final part, the article describes how the widespread use of a utilitarian rationality to explain African reality creates an illusion of neatness in comparative politics that leaves out some seminal information pertinent to explaining the changing dynamics of specific country cases.

A modest suggestion for improvement of the scholarly approach to African politics is attached at the end of each part. This article advocates for a general fragmentation of the African unit in more realistic (even respectful) units of analysis; a “logistical approach” to the definition of State fragility; and the advancement of research based on social mechanisms under the assumption that rational behaviour refers to all decisions assumed by the individual as meaningful.

The Onion, a famous newspaper in the United States specialized in fake and hilarious news, once published a piece of news claiming the U.S. State Department provided aid funds to Andorra, falsely believing it was located in Africa. Some commentators in the paper indicated the likelihood of such events occurring in future since it still seems difficult to fully comprehend the complexity of such a vast region where some countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo or Sudan are as large as the whole of Western Europe.

Although this article does not blatantly argue that the ignorance of Africa is behind all the problems related to theorizing about it, there are widespread assumptions that somehow Africa can be explained as a whole. Wholesome generalization of Africa can be seen when political or economic trends throughout a region are taken in totality (statistical analysis) or by assuming problems faced by the society in the region (dictatorship, poverty, corruption, etc.) are a shared problem. From this perspective Africa is a continent in which some nasty dictators affecting every thread of society must be controlled and generally weak civil society organizations must be supported (depending on what theory is fashionable to explain problems in the Third World). In an apparent rebuttal to Professor Mamdani’s LRB piece about Zimbabwe (2005), around thirty professors from universities across the world expressed in quite strong language (dishonest, posturing) their concern for the author’s apparent support to Mugabe. In their view, Mugabe was a (typical) brutal dictator that deserved to be opposed by all democratic forces. Mamdani replied indicating that whether

he favoured Mugabe or not was beside the point as he was only trying to: “free the debate about Zimbabwe from the narrow confines of a regime-opposition polemic by understanding Mugabe’s survival as part of a far bigger picture: that of land reform and the historic struggles which underpin it”.

What signatories to the letter were defending was democracy rather than research. They implied that in trying to explain the situation in Zimbabwe, especially by demonstrating some significant popular support for Mugabe’s regime, there was potential danger embedded in the direct or indirect support that could perpetuate the tenure of yet another brutal dictator in Africa. According to Mamdani’s critics if something was ever needed to stop the loss of life and human rights abuses in Africa, it was the need to have a clear purpose – a political concern and in their opinion Mamdani was not the right scholar in this regard. In this respect Africa is still a concept allowing generalizations – evil vs good, dictators vs civil society, press freedom vs ethnic hatred. Africa thus remains a place appropriate for labelling instead of explaining.

This discussion brings to the fore precisely why “Africa” has rendered a great disservice to Africans. The exchange between a Professor specialized in qualitative-historical research and a group of scholars specialized in African politics bring to the fore the point made in this article; A discussion about a specific country in Africa – irrespective of whether it is located in East, West, South, Central or North Africa brings to the centre of the debate the very ways in which we study and approach the African continent.

1. EXCESSIVE CONFIDENCE IN STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Africa is usually analysed from a statistical perspective. Trend analysis (tendencies) and regression models are widely used as empirical research on observed data. Usually ‘Africanists’ aim to determine if there are working correlations between democracy and other variables such as international aid, democratic events (elections), economical growth, etc., for a certain time span. Some key data sources such as Polity and Freedom house⁴ serve as democracy indexes, while other datasets generate indications of economical growth, party fragmentation, and so on. The critical challenge here is to provide convincing explanations accounting for observed trends or correlations that are representatively authentic and binding throughout Africa

This article does not suggest that statistical analyses about Africa are not useful, nor is it the intention of this article to question quantitative approaches in social sciences. The purpose of this article is simply to show why statistical analysis often fails to provide convincing explanations of both the observed trends and

⁴ Freedom house dataset is available at: www.freedomhouse.org/. Polity IV dataset is available at <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>

the data collected in Africa. The article uses some examples to illustrate how excessive confidence in statistical analysis produces flawed analysis. The article suggests oversimplification, analytical irrelevance and excessive subjective determination as the three major problems confronting the explanatory capacity of statistical analysis in relation to trends on the African continent.

The first problem is oversimplification

It is indeed a particularly weighty responsibility on the researcher to provide a convincing explanation of what the trends or the statistical models indicate for 48 countries. A necessary conclusion is that there is hardly any study with final, convincing explanations. A reader's common test would be to recall a particular country that does not fit in the explanation provided. Even when authors try their best to highlight differences and subtleties, they end up making quite untenable remarks in their quest to explain Africa.

Example 1: Van del Valle and the African Party System⁵

I shall try to illustrate oversimplification with Nicolas van del Valle's article: "Presidentialism and Clientelism in Africa's Emerging Party Systems" (Van del Valle, 2003). This article is especially suitable to point the problems associated with oversimplification given his reliance on three already common descriptors of African politics-illiberal nature, presidentialism and clientelism.

Briefly the author identifies three trends in Africa using a data base of 87 legislative elections in the 1990's. "[1] Parties that won founding elections are almost invariably still in power, [...] [2] the typical emerging party system has consisted of a dominant party surrounded by a large number of small, unstable parties and [...] [3] party cleavages have been overwhelmingly ethno-linguistic in nature, while ideological and programmatic debates have been muted and rare." Then the article provides three reasons explaining those trends: "[1] The illiberal nature of most of the new African democracies, [2] their characteristic centralization of power around the presidency, and [3] the pervasive clientelism that structures the relationship between the State and the citizenry."

In reviewing these three reasons behind the trends observed I will try to point some problems of oversimplification that led the author to unsatisfactory explanations.

⁵ Apart from the example provided see Azam (2001), [The fundamental problem confronting African States is how to substitute State-provided services for ethnic capital in the long run, starting with a string endowment of the latter]. For other statistical generalization with little explanatory capacity see, Collier, P. & Anke, H. (1999) and Mattes, R., Bratton, M. (2007). [To the extent that new democracies can open up and protect space for people to live their lives free of interference by overweening states, they may be able to begin a "virtuous cycle" of democratic development].

On the illiberal nature of most of the new African democracies, the author says most African democracies can barely be called liberal democracies. To support this assertion he points to their poor quality as political freedoms and civil rights are formally recognized but imperfectly observed in practice. Twelve multi party systems in the author's view deserve to be called "pseudo democracies" and eighteen more "partly free". Africa through these remarks appears to be a single federation of poorly administered States. Remarkably Van del Valle annotates that out of all the African countries a quarter can be considered liberal democracies. At face value we are entitled to ask why a quarter of African countries should still be included in the analysis. Which countries is he referring to? When explaining Africa, a quarter is not an insignificant portion to overlook.

But even as we assume that the analysis only applies to three quarters of the original intended sample there is another problem with the explanation based on the illiberal nature of most of the new African democracies. As the analysis is either based upon general observations or Freedom House scores we are never provided with a clear definition on what the liberal nature of a democracy is. In fact, the author twist the argument by indicating that it is the observed political competition that explains the emerging quality of democracy ("The lower the level of competition, in other words, the more likely the emergence of illiberal democracy"); but as we noted it was the quality of democracy that was supposed to be the basis to explain the kind of competition observed.

This problem of circularity in the argument regarding the illiberal nature of African democracies becomes especially significant as the author indicates that "dominant parties took advantage of their positions of strength [...] to consolidate their hold on power at the expense of political and civil rights". But if the quality of democracy was supposed to explain the kind of competition observed, why then suggest that the dominant parties in fact undermined the quality of democracy? This unwarranted oversimplification is paradoxical to say the least.

Following on "Presidentialism" the author briefly highlights the overwhelming role of the President and a small clique of elite cronies dominating power in Africa. It is presumed: "The president is above the law". However, this interesting description provides no explanation about how a single person and a handful of subordinates manage to dominate and manipulate not only the State but also the entire political system. Is it true "Presidentialism" is the cause of all observed political trends? Interestingly, if we swap cause and effect, another possible scenario emerges. Indeed, presidentialism might be the consequence (not the cause) of a political system with a single dominant party that is only challenged by some small competitors in a remarkably low ideological confrontation (Tanzania seems to fit here). It however seems Van del Valle took an observed fact – the relative strength of the president, and then assumed its single direction causality effect on the observed trends accruing for the entire region.

This brings us to the last cause mentioned by Van del Valle: “clientelism”—the cost-minus-benefit incentive which informs politician’s decision either to stay within the dominant party or to form a small one in order to have some leverage against the president’s party. Here the author discards virtuosity by pointing to the low trend of ideological debates. To prove this point he indicates that “most parties have adopted vague populism during elections; [...] Ideological differences have been minor across parties.” Studies from Ghana, Benin, Niger, Malawi and Chad support this assertion.

In Uganda one politician from the dominant party (NRM) narrated the “use” of some of the minor parties in the electoral system: “we take their criticisms to improve the government policies and so we appreciate what they do even as they are not prepared to lead”. It is therefore not necessarily naïve as a scholar to conceive a politician leading a minority party to influence policy. This article strongly holds the view that to some extent this is happening in Uganda: several small parties are struggling to offer credible political options confronting a dominant party. Thus, “clientelism”, in spite all its explanatory versatility, is unjustifiably stretched to constitute an ideal explanation of the political and policy decisions made in Africa. Clientelism is therefore a simplified illusion that seeks to counter reality.

The second problem confronting statistical analysis on Africa relates to analytical relevance

Statistical models prove or discard theoretical propositions and research question. But it is often the case that the theoretical framework used to verify research questions in Africa are based on models previously designed to explain some historical developments in the West. Statistical analysis in this regard will be based upon inherited but apparently false assumptions based upon comparative politics technically referred to as analogical historiography. By either proving or discarding the level of similarity in African trends, statistical analysis ends up establishing only the degree of resemblance without appreciating social dynamics that could have significant bearings on the occurrence of various trends. The fact that these theoretical assumptions are never discussed in depth, neither informed by qualitative research advanced in Africa opens a Pandora box when attempting to contrast “African common sense” with available datasets. Deductions based upon flawed theoretical assumptions renders such conclusions remotely detached from real and distinctive characteristics that characterise various social, economic and political aspects in Africa.

This is not to say that social mechanisms in Africa should be entirely idiosyncratic (although the complexity of each and every one society warrants some level of it). Actually “Exotic Africa” is not the solution; it is also part of the problem. However, when statistical or trend analysts only consider social mechanisms as explained in other societies when undertaking research on Africa, they inevitably end up at looking for similar trends at most and not explanations of occurring phenomena.

It is the opinion of this article that very few “imported mechanisms”, however elaborate or powerful they may be, constitute useful explanatory capacity that is empirically valid or realistic in this sense to explain the occurrence of some or a series of political trends throughout the entire continent. A few works such as *Class struggle* (Marx), *Bifurcated States* (Mamdani), *Free Markets* (various authors) attempt. But even with these; there is need for extreme caution and scrutiny. There is need to ardently examine the extent these works seek to genuinely answer questions in the quest to find out underlying factors explaining the occurrence of various phenomena from an African perspective or context related. There is a likelihood that such undertakings, if any; might serve better explanatory insights when applied to more in-depth studies in homogeneous regions within Africa.

The last problem facing statistical analysis on an African-wide perspective is subjective over-determination

This is not singularly caused by problems of conceptualization (as discussed in the second part of this article) but also by the limitations of the possible sample dominated by the scholar.

The problem is not so much as to whether there is a sacred definition or basis upon which every scholar agrees to measure or explain political trends but rather whether it can be said that the scholar is not biased in his measurement or explanation of these various trends by his *actual* knowledge of the various countries in Africa (Note the awkward identification of a scholars as “Africanists”, reminiscent of “Orientalists” denounced by Edward Said). Frequently the variables or trends are actually constructed or determined using discrete (disconnected) quantifications whereby the author *assigns* a “mark” to different criteria, then adds, subtracts or takes their average (explanations for doing such operations are rarely given). The greater the number of countries “measured” against unwarranted calculations, the greater the number of *errors* in the outcome. The mirage of portraying accurate and distinct *African* trends does not impede the analysts from giving farfetched explanations.

Example 2: Michael Bratton and Africa’s Divergent Transitions

I will illustrate the third problem with statistical analysis (subjective over-determination) using Bratton’s answer on why some African countries succeeded in acquiring democratic regimes while others failed (Bratton, 1997). Professor Bratton indicates:

[...] the most basic requirement for democracy is that citizens are empowered to choose and remove leaders [...] a transition to democracy is held to have occurred [in Africa] with the installation of a national government chosen on the basis of one competitive election, as long as that election is freely and fairly conducted within a matrix of civil liberties and all the contestants accept the validity of the election results.

Unfortunately, Bratton does not tell us what should be done to empower citizens to choose and remove leaders and nor does he accord us the opportunity to understand what “matrix of civil liberties” is let alone how is it supposed to be measured. However, the author indicates, that it is used within the definition to ensure: “that elections are not merely formalistic exercises in the uncontested ratification of incumbents.”

Democracy was also not defined. In the context of the article we must believe that democracy is taking place in countries where citizens have been empowered to choose and remove leaders. This is demonstrated by the holding of periodic elections conducted within a matrix of civil liberties. In Bratton's view nothing short of an election is worth calling democracy; “as no other democratic institution precedes elections, either in timing or importance; they are the *sine qua non* of democracy, a necessary condition without which democracy cannot otherwise be born.”

But Bratton's stance seems to be highly deceptive. Even if elections seem to be the most obvious feature of democracy, it is quite misleading to equate democracy to elections (*sine qua non*). Even if we are required to take into account that those elections should be embedded within a matrix of civil liberties (China may not be a good example but it will not be surprising if South Africa under the apartheid might actually qualify); we do not know how these civil liberties are supposed to be assessed (who, how, etc.), neither how they are supposed to come into existence. We are not also told whether civil liberties are forerunners of democracy. In fact it seems that when Bratton mentions civil liberties he is signifying the way in which they currently exist in the First World. But here we might ask are civil liberties (even accepting a very gross definition of them) to be imposed upon countries before democracy (elections) takes place? Is this really possible?

The real problem here is that when a concept like democracy is “barely” extracted from a certain reality and analyzed in a relatively different one, we run the risk of ignoring history, particularly the history of distinct African countries. By assuming democracy is equal to elections and that civil liberties precede elections, we are tacitly provided with a paradox, that democracy is independent of civil liberties.

Even if it is highly commendable to define concepts we are dealing with or to define them in terms of their most prominent features, it is important that while doing so “standard” perspectives must be tested against social mechanisms in a bid to ensemble explanations within historical and/or contextual perspectives. What comes first (which quite often becomes what should be done first) is a very complex issue that should not to be decided casually. Otherwise comparative analysis becomes biased pseudo-historical explanations based upon erroneously correlated concepts, leading to flawed policy. As Bertrand Russell indicated: “when he thinks he is recording observations about the outer world, he is really recording observations about what is happening in him.” (Russell, 1992).

It is not surprising that the author ended up categorizing (as of 31st of December 1994) Uganda as being as undemocratic as Mobutu's Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda (few months after the genocide), and even less democratic than Kenya, Mozambique and Cape Verde. The fact is that Uganda had significant strides towards democracy as a result of various reforms that had already been implemented at by the Museveni's Government (Mamdani would have called the reforms a truly democratic revolution: 1996). If we were to take seriously the author's classification –according to his quantitative model– Uganda would erroneously be only slightly better than Sudan and Liberia.

But this is not the only case in which misleading conceptualization can lead to flawed statistical analysis and problematic readings. When describing how cohesive opposition won power in all but one election, Professor Bratton comes to a twofold conclusion. First, where opposition was cohesive elections were honest and so opposition won. Second, where the opposition was fragmented the elections were flawed and so they lost.

What distinguished virtuous from corrupt elections? The effects of opposition cohesion remained consistent: of the fifteen countries with cohesive oppositions, only one experienced a problematic poll. In all other cases, relatively cohesive opposition movements provided an institutional counterweight to electoral manipulation. They helped to keep elections honest.

There is another explanation that is simply not considered. The opposition might have never actually come together perceiving it mission impossible to defeat the incumbent. In any case it is reasonable to think that people opposing Government will spend little political resources in making a coalition if defeat is apparent or guaranteed. In other words, it is highly likely that a cohesive coalition will only emerge if there is a reasonable expectation that it is possible to win.

Bratton's article, for all its brilliance, is therefore simply dangerously overstretched to try to capture adequate explanations of the diverging political transitions throughout Africa.

In ending this section it is worth quoting Sørensen's lamentation. "Fascination, if not an obsession" in reference to statistical models and concerns, neglects "the need to develop sociological models mirroring conceptions of mechanisms of social processes" leading to statistical models with "a conceptually meaningless list of variables preventing any kind of substantive conclusion." (Sørensen, 1998)

Thus, it is the opinion of this article that analyses based on statistical evidence on a wide-African political dimension runs the risk to become highly detached from reality. A mistaken lesson extracted from the demise of communism was that empirical research detached from ideological confrontations was synonymous of numerical analysis. Communism was the result of obsession with the social mechanism of Class Struggle. Marxism passed dangerously from historical analysis to political commitment. So in order to avoid this dangerous transformation of

explanations into ideologies, statistical analysis was to serve as containment. Mathematical observations were bound to be ideologically free, scientifically correct.

The problem with this idea, as highlighted above, is that statistical analysis is based upon previous theoretical assumptions. Numbers say little in a theoretical void. Neoliberal assumptions as well as Marxist ones can be encapsulated in statistical analysis and still offer the appearance of being ideologically-free. In this sense statistical analysis should be more accountable in its theoretical foundations.

Africa, even in numbers, still needs explanations, and they are not easily provided by statistical analysis. In the best case scenario African-wide statistical analysis serves to inform much more than to explain.

2. MEASURING AND COMPARING STATE FRAGILITY

Africa is visited frequently to determine the bottom lines in terms of State fragility (Somalia, Congo, Angola, etc.). Some generalizations emerge, but they usually appear short of explanatory power for specific country cases. I will emphasize in this section the fact that some approaches to State fragility are actually designed to group different countries in Africa. In other words, the concept created at the top (State fragility) serves to put together realities at the bottom (African countries, Third World). However, this article suggests that even as this literature points to a general feature of States in Africa - their fragility, it does little to offer insightful explanations of that very fragility and the ways to measure it.

State fragility as a “broken mirror” and as analogous historiography

I wish to suggest that there exist two differentiated scholar approximations to “State fragility”. The first one refers to a political science category useful to classify democratic and institutional underdevelopment in the Third World and in Africa in particular. In this category I shall include both quantitative statistical exercises as the State Failure Task Force (SFTF), and qualitative studies designed to offer policy advice. Underestimation of history (either in regional and national terms) is a determining feature of this literature.

The second approximation refers to the need to generate comparative literature that entails applying general theories on social mechanisms (mainly Weberian and Marxist ones) with the intent of determining the causes of State fragility. It is preoccupied with in-depth studies that entail appreciation of critical social mechanisms explaining State fragility. However, a major weakness of this second approach is that while trying to explain Third World cases much of the historical evidence is strongly European-based.

State Fragility as a Broken Mirror

In the first approach a fragile State is described as a “quasi-State”, a relatively distant irregularity from an ideal category that can be referred to as a liberal-market-democracy. Typically a fragile State would also be defined as corrupt and not free (moral linguistic hedges abound). Several definitions in the literature do fit in this category. Even if this literature intends to present State fragility as a clear cut category, it often involves some conceptualizations derived from relatively new ideologies such as neo-liberalism (market democracy), developmental theory (new comers, late developers), and neo-institutionalism (weak institutions). State fragility used in this way almost invariably passes quickly from a brief description of what a fragile State is to a rapid explanation on how it could be avoided. Two examples might serve to illustrate this approach (all emphasis mine):

- a. “States fail when they are convulsed by civil war, fail to provide political goods, and become illegitimate. Research for a Book Manuscript in progress suggests several mutually reinforcing paths to failure. Along the economic one, rapidly deteriorating standards of living, coupled with the perceived unfair arrogation of the remaining financial rewards to a favoured family, clan, or small group, accelerates a fall.” (Belfer Center, 2008)
- b. Most African States have never had effective institutions, relying instead on the personalized networks of patronage. They have never generated sustainable growth. Factionalism has always been politically prevalent, and States have more often been instruments of predation and extraction than tools for the pursuit of public goods. In vast parts of Africa, State failure is less an objective condition than a permanent mode of political operation. [...] Many are “States that fail[ed] before they form[ed].” Indeed, the evidence is overwhelming that most of Africa’s collapsed States at no point in the postcolonial era remotely resembled the ideal type of the modern Western polity. The DRC, for example, has never possessed a monopoly on coercion, nor has it ever enjoyed the rule of law or an effective bureaucracy. [...] The absence of checks and balances in failed states provides opportunities for rulers to misappropriate public resources. (Englebert, P. and Tull, D., 2008).

Even though many of these reviews mention several pertinent aspects that seek to explain State failure such as “the monopoly of force”, “legitimacy”, “bureaucratic development”, and “institutional strength”, few of them attempt to develop further what they mean by these concepts, neither try to establish how to measure them or to describe social mechanisms determining their internal structure.

Within this tradition, a concept like “legitimacy” is rather randomly assumed to be related with the celebration of electoral processes, some degree of religious unity, or some ideological hegemony within the political systems. No definition however is provided, neither suggestion of how to establish its reality on the ground. The same can be said about concepts such as “bureaucratic development”

and “institutional strength” which are often connected to mean some degree of technical expertise and the abundance of rule of law. Even if this is the case of a very brief account of Weberian theory, it actually says very little in terms of decentralization, territorial control, or in more general terms what Michael Mann has called infrastructural power. This is a significant handicap that must be addressed when trying to establish the causes of State failure, its measurement and most importantly how to offer advice on how to overcome it.

All in all, the problem with this first approach to State fragility is that it presumes to describe the situation of any African country. In attempting to describe havoc or civil turmoil, or even economic hardship, State fragility serves very little to clarify the causes as well as the intensity of the fragility in a particular country.

State fragility as analogical historiography

More focused and academically rigorous literature centres its study about State fragility basing on European and U.S. history. Historically supported models, explaining social mechanisms are all too often stretched to “account for” developments (or underdevelopment) in Africa. One major problem with this kind of literature is its lack of “touch” with relevant developments on the ground. A great deal of analogous interpretations from Western history often end up “looking out” for supporting evidence to fit particular theoretical structures. This kind of literature often ends up foreseeing outcomes other than appreciating and affirming the occurrence of particular trends. Even if a great deal of illuminating insight is derived from those exercises in order to understand State fragility, there is always oversimplification (in specific Third World case explanations) and generalizations (in comparisons undertaken among different cases).

These characteristics of analogical historiography are highlighted by Alex Maroya in his presentation of Migdal's approach to State fragility:

- Different types of rents have different implication for State formation. We do not have a general theory of the political economy of rentier states. In particular, our understanding of the political economy of states that depends on strategic rents remains relatively rudimentary and contestable. There are three broad reasons for this: The first is that strategic rents are very diverse, the second is that many of them are relatively hard to quantify and the third is that, in the case of development aid in particular, there may be quite complex reflexive interactions between the inflow of rents (that is, aid) and the character of the state.
- This kind of approach, based on critical insights on social mechanisms and interest based collective action coming from the second tradition described in the review above- tries to avoid quick analogies by looking at the “evidence” of State power.

A very brief description of the methodological endeavours of this logistical perspective includes:

- a. Offering a very concise definition of a State that together with the monopoly of force emphasizes its ability to co-opt society both politically and logistically. By adopting such a force and logistical centred perspective, we avoid the introduction in the definition of historical outcomes –even if it is desirable on how the State exercises its power. Democracy or welfare, for example, might not necessarily determine the state’s ability to enforce outcomes in society.
- b. Producing a definition that could also be operationalized in such a way that each concept could be measured in terms of its projection in society. In order to illustrate the meaning of this logistical perspective in analyzing African politics, I will use one example provided by Jeffrey Herbs (1989) in his study about boundaries in Africa.

In explaining how the current African boundaries were demarcated, Herbs describes a double European concerted policy of keeping a maximum external sovereignty through treaties of mutual respect whilst assuming a minimal approach to internal sovereignty based in an efficient extraction using relatively modest financial efforts. As a result of these arrangements (dating from the Berlin conference), African boundaries would have favoured maximum peace and at minimum cost in terms of development of administrative structures to exert internal control.

Bringing the consequences of this heritage to the present day, Herbs describes how the OAU came to use the same double policy. On the one hand, by preserving the African borders, it has assumed a likewise approach to external sovereignty; on the other hand, by equalizing nation-wide equating sovereignty with the effective control of the capital city, the OAU has accepted as a fact the logistical difficulties that central governments face in projecting their power to different parts of their territories. He indicates “control of the capital is today simply the minimal level of government presence that the Europeans first defined at the Berlin Congo Conference”.

The historical interpretation provided by Herbs puts some interesting questions. If sovereignty has been fundamentally centred on the capital city, what kind of consequences has this had for the formation of a dynamic market through the incentives for migration to different regions or the formation of middle sized cities? How do some countries’ capital cities connect with the rest of the national territory? How a certain position of the capital city favoured military control, infrastructure or even international trade? Unfortunately no further discussion is provided about those topics. I am bound to believe that as while Herb’s perspective was mainly African, he could not advance much further into this enquiry (for it required more specific country cases analysis).

In fact it appears that Herbs actually opted for a more easy option as he indeed appeared to have found in –yet again– analogical historiography. Indeed, in reaching the concluding remarks of his analysis, Herbs appears to adopt uncritically Tilly’s model of war-make-State and state-make-war. As he indicate

African leaders in the future may come to see war as one way of creating stronger political institutions at home. As many European historians have noted, the preparation for and the conduct of battles were a driving force behind the growth of states in Europe. [...] “war made the State, and the State made war.” If African leaders judge that the cost of continuing domestic political weakness outweighs the safety provided by the current State system, there could be significant efforts to rearrange the map of Africa. [...] it should be obvious that the incentives which African leaders have to incite wars for the purposes of state-making are already significant and may become even stronger in the future when the futility of domestic reform during times of “business as usual” (peace) becomes clear.

By bringing up Herbs analysis, I have shown a very creative research agenda to study about the State performance for different countries in Africa; meanwhile, I could also show how analogous historiography intended to explain how “African politics” can actually block the path toward such agenda.

3. SOCIAL MECHANISMS AND BLACK BOXES

In explaining political and social outcomes the scholar has to offer a credible or testable account showing how they are the final result of individual beliefs, actions, and attitudes; otherwise descriptions would appear to be based in unjustifiable and arbitrary emotions. Explaining a social mechanism thus means to describe the personal reasons shaping the interaction of individuals. I will suggest that in African studies the oversimplification in explaining these social mechanisms have favoured a narrow approach on cost-minus-benefit utilitarian rationality. For all its simplicity this has favoured nice universal modelling while sacrificing explanatory power.

Indeed, universal descriptions of politicians looting the State and crony networks of clientelism destroying institutions are based in a single social mechanism that can be read as follows: “I can steal; then I do”. Given the opportunities African leaders will maximize their economical interests. Patrimonialism has fit so well this description that it has become a replacement for research on what shaped differences among countries. As a result a single label appears to be explaining the reality of the African State but in the best case it is simply denouncing the phenomena.

Even as we accept patrimonialism as sufficient explanation behind some practices observed in the politics of some African countries, it is hard to hold as true that it is the single most powerful mechanism explaining African politics; in fact,

it might be just the iceberg on top of some other more profound constrains and balances providing rational meaning (not necessarily cost-minus-benefit) to the decisions assumed by those different actors.

Take the case of Mamdani's explanation of the African bifurcated State in its consequences for the political interactions of all the social forces around the state. A particular structure of differentiated rule (direct and indirect) determined the outcomes in the transition to independence and then after the intents to structure political power throughout Africa. A bifurcated State effectively determined not only the way in which the State incorporated the people to its rule but also the way in which the people reacted against the power of the state.

Mamdani's example serves here a double purpose. In the first place it serves to highlight the importance of searching for other, less evident, social mechanisms shaping social interactions. It invites both to look out throughout Africa for interactions deserving an explanation, instead of probing if a certain explanation from European history proves useful for African reality. But it also serves to put forward that there is nothing wrong in talking about Africa, only that it should be for a worthy, indeed, powerful reason based in a social mechanism; in this case a bifurcated State inherited from colonial times.

But apart from the common reference to patrimonialism or other similar labels for the greedy tendency of social actors in the African milieu, African studies have also a market tendency to put labels or titles to some unexplained social mechanisms. Tribalism, ethnic hatred, detachment, etc, are common labels bypassing the required explanation of the particular reasons for individuals to take part in certain behaviours. The use of these references creates the apparent effect of having an explanation but in fact, they only serve to generalize and mix cases that should not be together otherwise.

Explaining social mechanisms using the Cognitivist Model (CM)

To make sense of what people do, utilitarian rationality indicates that individuals maximize. However, this maximization requirement implies that false beliefs as well as normative beliefs are irrational and so they cannot be accounted for in terms of maximization. This means that a misinformed individual following his false beliefs cannot be acting rationally just as the ignorant worker is acting irrationally when following the false belief of salvation through tirelessly work.

In the same way, a person's decision based upon her perception of what is good cannot be accepted as rational because it does not maximize her personal well being (like cheating). The practical effect is the elimination of alternative analyses that accept as rational to take decisions based on either false assumptions or in normative beliefs. As the scholar set up to explain why certain individuals take such and such decisions, he is either endowed with a greedy-like explanation or he simply sidesteps the explanation by adopting a mere label to cover his ignorance.

In order to widen up the options available to the scholar Raymond Boudon (1998) proposes to adopt a Cognitivist Model (CM):

“The CM supposes that actions, decisions and beliefs are meaningful to the actor in the sense that they are perceived by him as grounded on reasons.”

CM includes utilitarian rationality but also accepts as rational any decision taken under the following template: “He did X because he *believed that Z is likely or true, and he had strong reasons* for believing so” or “She did X because she *believed that Z is fair, good, or unfair, and she had strong “nonconsequential” reasons* of believing so.”

What the individual strongly considers to be likely or true opens the door to take into account historical awareness, biographies. Indeed, before rushing to stamp greed and corruption as explanatory devices everywhere, we can consider certain actions as based upon different, rational considerations. Countries historiography recovers –ironically– its explanatory importance; next to it, a credible account of actor’s interpretation of history (even if it is based upon false beliefs) takes a fundamental role in explaining his choices. Political movements can be better explained under these assumptions.

On the other hand what the individual strongly considers to be fair led us to ask for shared values and moral assumptions determining individual’s choices. Accounts on ideological trends can stand on their own providing they demonstrate how certain sets of axiological evaluations rationally determined a particular decision taken by an individual.

Historical, biographical and ideological explanations, together with other clusters of idiosyncratic considerations combine to form the experimental context in which decisions appear as meaningful to the individual. In this way as social mechanisms emerge, old generalizations melt. In this sense social mechanisms are like weak theories explaining (powerfully) relatively few cases.

The invitation is precisely to opt for these weak theories that favour progressive inferences capable of accounting for observed regularities, genuine providers of final explanations. As Hedström and Swedberg have argued (1996):

The main reason for advocating explanations that directly refer to generative mechanisms is, in our opinion, that they provide (or encourage) deeper, more direct, and more fine-grained explanations. The search for generative mechanisms consequently helps us distinguish between genuine causality and coincidental association, and it increases the understanding of why we observe what we observe.

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