



States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control

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Theories of international relations, assumed to be universally applicable, have failed to explain the creation of states in Africa. There, the interaction of power and space is dramatically different from what occurred in Europe. In his groundbreaking book, Jeffrey Herbst places the African state-building process in a truly comparative perspective, examining the problem of state consolidation from the precolonial period, through the short but intense interlude of European colonialism, to the modern era of independent states. Herbst's bold contention--that the conditions now facing African state-builders existed long before European penetration of the continent--is sure to provoke controversy, for it runs counter to the prevailing assumption that colonialism changed everything.

In identifying how the African state-building process differs from the European experience, Herbst addresses the fundamental problem confronting African leaders: how to extend authority over sparsely settled lands. Indeed, efforts to exert control over vast, inhospitable territories of low population density and varied environmental and geographical zones have resulted in devastating wars, millions of refugees, and dysfunctional governments perpetrating destructive policies.

Detailing the precise political calculations of distinct African leaders, Herbst isolates the basic dynamics of African state development. In analyzing how these leaders have attempted to consolidate power, he is able to evaluate a variety of policy alternatives for dealing with the fundamental political challenges facing African states today.

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Mike Hankins says

The main argument here is that geography determines power structures. Essentially, power was formed differently in Africa than in Europe because of geography. Africa has tons of space, open space, that is hard to traverse because of climate, the lack of navigable rivers, or mountains. Herbst argues that a society like the Egyptian Nile river valley could not have existed in Africa, and the way that Europe developed clearly defined borders and needed large armies to defend them also had little relevance to Africa. Thus, Africa developed a system of power centers and peripheries -- near the large cities, power could be held and consolidated, but the cost of projecting power outside of a local center was too great, so many people could live in the periphery and not be affected by power centers. Strict borders were unnecessary, and the cost of building large armies to protect borders was too high and unnecessary also.

Herbst also argues that imperial powers, when they began to exploit Africa, faced the same challenges and had similar responses, thus they developed localized power centers and struggled when they tried to project power further out. Thus, Herbst sees a lot of continuity between the pre-colonial and colonial periods, at least in terms of power structures.

The argument is mostly convincing, and I think its a useful model, but its necessarily broad and vague, covering a huge continent over several centuries. Surely any detailed analysis of a particular region or time frame can poke holes in this model. But as a broad starting point, I think it works well.

!Tæmbu?u says

KOBOBOOKS

Doron says

This is a bit of a dry read, but it's an intriguing work.

Jeffrey Herbst's 'States and Power in Africa', as the title alludes to, focuses on how the exercise of power and the design of state boundaries in Africa has shaped many of the problems afflicting African states today and led to the creation of failed states. Herbst examines and contrasts the projection of power in Africa in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence periods and surveys the role of boundaries in the evolution of state power in Africa. The changing nature of state boundaries and state systems from pre-colonial to post-independence times and the enduring concentration of power around the core political areas are key factors in the inability of African states to consolidate power and authority, acquire or preserve legitimacy in the eyes of its subjects, provide effective governance in many areas and maintain order and the rule of law; all of which contribute directly to the creation of failed states.

The main solution to state building in Africa offered in this book is to redefine state boundaries to better reflect the social and political realities on the ground; but for that to happen, political reform (i.e. democracy)

will need to take place first.

SpaceBear says

Herbst constructs an argument attempting to explain the reasons that the modern African state fails to govern or develop areas on its periphery. The basic argument is that the pre-colonial forms of rule were ones which 'rippled out' from a power base, with certain areas coming under the suzerainty of multiple leaders or benefactors. The primary explanation for this is the difficulty of African geography, and the fact that populations are sparsely spread out. The attempt to control a large, therefore, was difficult due to the simple fact that people could move beyond the area of control. This has continued in the post-colonial area, however given that leaders need not concern themselves with the integrity of their borders (due to international consensus regarding non-interventionism), they simply ignore the peripheries at the expense of the core. This, Herbst asserts, is a key explanation for the emergence of rural-based guerrilla insurgencies.

Jeffrey Mervosh says

I should start by saying that if I could have written any book on international affairs or politics, this would have been it. I think Herbst's book is brilliant. That said, here's an interesting thought exercise:

The premise of "States and Power in Africa" is that Africa's underdevelopment and instability can in part be explained by the manner in which states were forged, and the relationships they maintain with their people. Herbst concludes that the ability of a state to project enough power to tax a population fairly and efficiently is both a mark of stability and development. Obviously this is something that doesn't exist in any real sense in Africa, so it makes for a provocative argument. But it's one that I'm beginning to sense has real merit.

Herbst begins by analogously examining Europe's political development in order to show that taxes form the fundamental social contract between Western populations and their states. The people agree to give up a portion of their capital in exchange for specific services provided by the state - namely, security, various civil liberties, infrastructure, sanitation, electricity, etc. Now, this would make sense to replicate in Africa, except that the historical structure of African society is not conducive to instituting such a system.

Europe's political consolidation took a very long time - centuries of conflict and political division have sliced and diced the continent into political entities of varying duration. Herbst argues that it was this seemingly endless process of conflict and political jockeying that created the modern state. Leaders in a city sought to secure their position against external threats. The easiest way to do this was to acquire geographic space between their metropole and the metropole of the enemy. To do this, power had to be extended into the periphery. Armies were sent into the hinterland of states, determined to deter invasion. In exchange for this protection from pillaging and conflict, the population of these territories were expected to pay tribute. This early form of taxation marked the first time that elites in the metropole were able to exact any real control over remote rural areas. And it also marked the beginning of democracy (rural populations denounced taxation without compensation, and in some cases demanded representation to secure desired compensation).

As time passed and the threat of conflict subsided, the relationship (taxation) between the state and the people remained. However, the people demanded that the state provide other services now that security was

no longer paramount. Thus, the beginning of public funding for infrastructure development, education, etc. The social contract between state and society has endured.

Now, African states were born into the same borders created by the 1885 Conference of Berlin. These artificial colonial boundaries were adopted by African leaders as a necessity in order to ward off the sort of violent shifting of political allegiances implicit in actual self-determination. On this both the international community and African nationalists were united - to open the discussion to a re-drawing of borders would only invite chaos and instability. And to date, Africa has remained stable in that sense. There has only been one real intrastate conflict (well, depending how you count - Libya's incursions into Darfur in the 1980's pissed off Sudan but didn't amount to much; Ethiopia technically owned Eritrea for the duration of that conflict; Ethiopia invaded Somalia in the last year or so, but did so at the behest of the internationally-recognized government there; and South African troops did fight against the Angolan government in the early nineties, but not under the South African flag) in the whole of Africa's independence period, a pretty remarkable record given the bloodshed in the formative years of Europe's political development.

That said, internal conflicts are common. Herbst argues this is because African states don't have the capacity to tax. Or rather, the security of their borders has never compelled states to develop the same relationship with their populations that has been cultivated in Europe and America.

For the literary gurus, think of the African state in the same way that Dante considered Hell (not a far stretch of the imagination for most whose familiarity with Africa is one of conflict and death). Concentric circles emanate outward from the metropole, only in Africa, chaos increases further away from the center. The state is able to exert control over the capital out of necessity, and as such, taxation there is common. However, out in the bush the state is non-existent. Why devote state resources to protecting a border that is in no danger of violation?

Well, perhaps because failure to control one's own hinterland is the greatest threat to political stability in Africa that we can identify. In the absence of the state providing public services and security, it is common for rural populations in Africa to turn elsewhere. In some cases the international community can step in and prop up local economies through aid. And in others, warlordism rises to challenge the state. Regionally-based entrepreneurs, eager to sever linkages between the state and resource accumulation or capital extraction, make bargains with local populations, providing basic services in exchange for allegiance to movements that rise in opposition to the state. By capitalizing on the human insecurity of population centers outside the sphere of influence of the metropole, these warlords are able to challenge state authority and legitimacy. You can imagine how states take this - they seek to crush any and all threats to supremacy, and war is created. And then if the warlords emerge victorious power shifts and there is a new hinterland and a new metropole, and soon new opposition.

Furthermore, underdevelopment is perpetuated by this cycle in two distinct ways. First, inequality is created through the unequal distribution of aid and capital accumulation by the state. Clientelism and rent-seeking in the metropole is unfortunately exceedingly common, creating distortions in income distribution and aid disbursal. Economic growth (however slow) serves the elite few and not the poor - in fact, when inflation rises faster than wages, it can actually hurt the poor. Healthy social service institutions can alleviate this cleavage in society. Second, conflict only serves to destroy all sorts of indicators, from economic (inflation, etc.) to human development (life expectancy drops, education rates plummet as children become soldiers instead of students, local economies are destroyed by pillaging, and infant mortality increases as sanitary medical facilities become rare). In fact, the World Bank has acknowledged that conflict is the biggest "trap" keeping underdeveloped states poor.

So maybe it's time to re-evaluate the exercise in liberalist state building going on in Africa. Politically, the continent is still in its infancy, and despite criticism there are signs that its development may still be more rapid than its European forefathers. But in lieu of the fundamental force that drove state consolidation in Europe, some creative engineering may be in order. In other words, the key to development in Africa just may be a good tax policy. All this time we've been sending members of the World Health Organization and the International Monetary Fund to Africa when perhaps we should have been sending representatives from the IRS!

Gundopush says

Among the best of this type of book I have ever read.

This book is academic enough that it might prove difficult for those not used to the idiosyncrasies of political science writing.

Andrew Kaplan says

A fascinating examination of the fundamental issues in Africa that maintained from pre-colonial times, through colonization, and into today. Herbst calls for a reexamination of African political history beginning with a break from the ethnocentric European perspective. The development of the European state and the African state significantly contrast, and are in actuality polar opposites with respect to geographical make-up which are one of the critical factors for the failure of many African states. I highly recommend for anyone with an interest in political science, Int'l Affairs, Africa, or just plain History. Herbst's analysis is crucial for the next step in examining sovereignty and the make-up of a state, as well as most importantly the future of Africa's states .

Mike Nicholson says

Woke up early this Sunday morning, so might as well get to reading my stack o' books.

Ian Fleischmann says

Herbst's book is an extension of Tilly's argument in that it was not land, but labor that was scarce in developing African states. This did not bring states into direct conflict until after their false creation through European colonialism and thus their state institutions lacked the social credibility and depth complicated by the manipulation of those states as Cold War proxies and subjugation through development aide. Herbst proposes two camps of solutions to the problem: state reform or state reconstruction. State reform may be aided from the outside but largely consists of the development of internal institutions to reassert control throughout physical territory. State reconstruction may come in the form of support to state devolution and re-definition (such as with the establishment of South Sudan) or simply the revocation of recognition of sovereignty for states who fail to maintain control (which could be applied in states like Mali). Lastly, Herbst proposes a possibility of a new solution beyond the nation-state concept but leaves the operationalization of this concept to the minds of the readers, and more specifically, Africans since the only way such a move

could work would be an internal revolution and redesign of state institutions.

Formal criticisms of Herbst include his overreliance on population density (ala Tilly) as a driving factor in poor institution development as opposed to colonialism and value judgments on the quality of developed states and their support for individual rights and decreasing levels of violence. Of the two, it seems to me the assumption that somehow more alignment between a state's institutions and borders would make a state more responsive to the needs of its people or stable would appear to be hopeful if not misguided. One could imagine the suffering generated in an African version of the 30-years war as states seek to redefine themselves in accordance with the limits of their control. One could also argue that such a process has been ongoing in Somalia since 1991 with little resolution. In summary, Herbst's extension of Charles Tilly's argument for state formation is logically-constructed but I'm not sure his propositions for the future are of much help.

Insomuch as Herbst has appropriated the basic framework of Charles Tilly in terms of the structuralist approach to nation-building, it goes without saying that he should be [rightly] criticized for overlooking the domestic interplay of culture and politics. Herbst would likely employ the same defense as Tilly (generalization of trends and accounted for in the concept of coercion structures) but this approach is insufficient to explain the range of levels of development evident in African states. Also, for a supposedly scholarly work, this book is lacking a detailed bibliography. The footnotes are there so I'm not sure why the author or publisher chose not to include one.

goddess says

Really good insight into Africa pre-colonial, colonized, and post-colonial. The author makes some interesting points differentiating the states of Africa and those of Europe, who were the colonizers. He talks about the problems that most Africa countries have had and continue to have with maintaining control within their borders. Though he explains why he didn't include the northern regions of the continent in his writings, I felt like there should have been some discussion regarding them and how they do (or do not) fit with the rest of Africa.

Dylan Groves says

fundamental problem of state consolidation in africa is political geography - low population densities and difficult topography

would-be state builders confront the challenge of political geography on three dimensions: (1) cost (2) political boundaries, (3) character of state system

elvedril says

A really interesting book explaining the system governing states and power in pre-colonial sub-saharan Africa. His explanation of the topographical and social reasons that led to a different political and military model than in most of Europe and Asia is a valuable for anybody interested in the region or just fascinated by the political theory.

Greg says

This is an important corrective to the usual post-colonial interpretation of recent African history. The underdevelopment and political instability in Africa is not all the fault of colonialism or neocolonialism. It has continuity with pre-colonial Africa. Geography and demography play a large role in the problems of Africa. Outside of the white settler colonies, governments have had difficulty broadcasting authority and actually controlling the territory of the state. This has always been the case in Africa. Africa has always been a sparsely settled continent of generally hostile environments except for southern Africa. In pre-colonial times, Africa had empires but never states, and people has always had more value than land.
