

## How African is Africa?

Patrick Chabal and the Limits of Area Studies

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**WHERE NEXT FOR POLITICAL SCIENCE IN AFRICA?  
DEBATING PATRICK CHABAL'S  
*AFRICA: THE POLITICS OF SUFFERING AND SMILING***

**INTRODUCTION**

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Any discussion of politics in Africa today is confronted with three apparently intractable issues: how to define 'Africa'; how to make sense of the problems besetting the continent; and what can we do about it. As a result, our approach to the understanding of the continent is conditioned, and perhaps over-determined, by an unholy alliance of normative and practical questions. On the one hand, we constantly have to revise our standpoint, since we need to come to terms with the fact that existing explanations do not, in fact, explain very well what is happening in Africa. On the other hand, we approach the continent with an all-too instrumental agenda, which seems to compel us ceaselessly to search for the 'solutions' to its problems. We swing between the frustration of not understanding and the need to find out what to do.

This conundrum is compounded by the fact that the West has a peculiar fascination with Africa, which has acted as a mirror since at least the nineteenth century. The emergence in Europe of evolutionary theories combined with the need to justify the colonisation of the continent on the basis of Africa's 'backwardness' were critical to the West's construction of the image of its modernity. This

was reinforced by an examination of the continent from the perspective of social theories based on ostensibly teleological and developmental premises, by which the evolution of Africa was compared to that of the West. The outcome was an image of the continent as a 'black hole', an environment in which 'modernisation' was problematic. Either it was assumed that Africa was simply lagging behind and would in due course develop along broadly 'modern' (read Western) lines. Or it was presumed that there were recognisably African 'specificities' (read irrationality and violence) that made it impossible for the continent to 'modernise'.

As I see it, the difficulty lies primarily with two key preliminary and interlinked questions, which are not sufficiently discussed in Africanist scholarship. One has to do with the West's understanding of the 'universal' and the 'local'. Here, there is an inbuilt bias in the social sciences to view 'universal' and 'local' as dichotomously distinct. Attempts by some anthropologists to suggest the concept of 'glocal', relating local issues to globalisation, are one possible answer. Nevertheless, the basic assumption in the social sciences is that there are some 'universals' by which we can measure all humans and all human activity.

The other centres on the notion of 'theory'. Here, Western social and political thought operates by means of a very specific definition of theory, derived from the physical sciences, on which virtually all causal explanation is constructed. That notion of theory is predicated on a clear idea of what is 'universal' and what is 'local'. The exercise consists in employing a 'universal' theory to explain the 'local' contingencies of the phenomena under scrutiny. There is in this way an inherent epistemological difficulty that makes it difficult to strike out of the conceptual circle social scientists and practitioners use when explaining the African 'crisis' or offering 'solutions' to it.

*Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling* is an attempt to think through these difficulties by offering elements of a differently grounded concept of 'theory'. 'Elements', because one of my aims is to move away from the 'imperialism of theoretical necessity' – by which I mean the social science diktat, which consists in insisting that we cannot do social science unless we have a

theory to justify and operationalize what we do. I prefer to work with a far wider notion of theory, which is perhaps best defined by saying that theory is what we do when we think analytically about a question. This is not to suggest that we think without theories but rather that we do not need to fit our thinking into the straightjacket of a particular theory before we attempt an analysis. It means, in addition, that what theory is in practice is a mode of explanation that can provide insight rather than a conceptual construct, which seeks confirmation or refutation. Finally, it implies that such theory needs to make *both* universal and local sense – that is, provide explanations that make sense to *both* outsiders *and* insiders.

This approach brings to the fore two questions, which are central to the book. One is that the type of theory I advocate is contextual and unstable, liable to change according to standpoint or context. Or to put it another way: context and standpoint need to be incorporated into the theoretical framework that is proposed. This means, *inter alia*, that the analysts must make explicit both their ‘subjectivities’ *and* the ways these are brought to bear on the explanations provided. There is no detached observer/analyst; only an interested participant trying to illuminate what politics means and how power is exercised in Africa. The very structure of the book’s analytical framework, therefore, is predicated on the assumption that its ‘theory’ can, indeed ought, to be questioned and challenged. It is not a theoretical statement but a proposal for a theoretical framework that helps us ‘read’ the evidence on the ground.

The other is that the organisation of the material in the book – that is, the analysis of the political in Africa – is drawn from my reading of the politics of ‘everyday life’. Or, to put it another way, that the chapters in the book derive from my understanding of how the political plays out at the local level in the unfolding of individual and collective lives – from birth to death. The chapters seek to reflect the cycle of life as it is presently experienced in Africa. They chart the incremental complexity of lives as they are lived, from the consolidation of social identity to the search for

resources and status, all the while facing the pitfalls of a perilous, and often unforgiving, material existence.

Thus, the seven chapters that comprise the body of the book focus on what I consider to be the key moments and fundamental issues that mark human existence in contemporary Africa. The first three – ‘Being’, ‘Belonging’ and ‘Believing’ – map out the core dimensions of life, the pillars of identity and sociability. The next two – ‘Partaking’ and ‘Striving’ – try to address the question of how individuals manage the political and economic opportunities as well as constraints with which they are confronted. The last two chapters – ‘Surviving’ and ‘Suffering’ – attempt to make concrete both the enormous difficulties Africans face in their daily lives and the extraordinary resources they deploy to overcome them. I hope that in this way the book will bring not just some analytical clarity but also a sense of the politics of ordinary lives in today’s Africa. This would be but a small token of my admiration for the men and women I have met in a continent, to which I have returned regularly since the early 1970s.

As may be obvious, there is one chapter missing – The Politics of Smiling – which should have come at the close of the book. For personal and no doubt subjective reasons, it is one I felt I was not able to write at this stage but would want to add to a future edition, when the smile is more firmly one of hope rather than mere resilience.

## CHABAL'S SWEEPING *BON SEQUITUR*

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Patrick Chabal would not mind the hybridity of terms in my title. His central message is that nothing is as obvious as the imposition of formal systems makes it seem. Systems of rationality with a self-styled 'universality' serve certain projects well and marginalize those of others. Those of others, however, are not pure in themselves but mix and match influences and impositions to take something original into the future. His new book is a natural follow-on and development of *Africa Works* but is something which deserves an influence well beyond African studies. The Zed series title is 'World Political Theories' and Chabal's account of epistemologies is what I concentrate on here, exploring how it helps illuminate debate in social sciences and even, for instance, my own discipline of international relations. In international relations, the established methodological traditions are based on scientific rationalities (Nicholson 1992), more qualitative reasonings based on European Enlightenment thought (Thompson 1992), post-war 'critical' philosophic thought derived from German sources (Wiggershauss 1994), postmodern thought derived from French work (Bleiker 2000), and the debates based on the history and philosophy of social science derived from Popper, Kuhn and Feyerabend (Hollis and Smith 1991). There is nothing derived from outside Europe and the United States – certainly nothing from Africa.

Like *Africa Works*, however, there is a tension at the heart of the new book. Chabal justifies Africa-generalization but warns against Africa-essentialism. This is signalled both at the beginning and the end of the book, but the line where one blurs into the other is never easily drawn –

just as in *Africa Works*, a book that established a general principle of rationally-based African informality, there was a tension between what was a general principle and what was a universal condition. The lines of crossover, where rational though informal systems interact with formal ones, and are sometimes subordinated to formal ones, were never really elaborated. Chabal is at his best when establishing a critique of orthodoxy and regularity, and is not always as accomplished in the recognition of modern institutions that work – under certain conditions anyway – in a regular manner. But, as an exponent of critique and particularly as an exponent of the immense humanity that should be located at the heart of the Africanist project, Chabal is the master.

That humanity is best expressed in this new book in chapter 7, 'The Politics of Suffering'. This is as much a lament as an exposition. Chabal is deeply touched by the suffering found on the continent. In the section on illness he is at pains to express how the *psychological* (168) impact of illness is different to that in the West. He has words to say about how this affects views of treatment for HIV, not to mention views on the worth of modernity. The phenomenon of 'denial' is, by Chabal, given both a cultural dimension and the more obvious dimension of there simply not being modern treatment within accessible reach – meaning, as often as not, simple geographical reach. The danger here is that the suffering African becomes the circumscribed African – circumscribed by his or her own illness and the social context of that illness.

I mention this simultaneously humane and circumscriptive section because it illustrates Chabal's approach to the question of agency. There is much African agency in the coping with adverse conditions. He wishes 'to honour the day-to-day lives of those who strive to maintain human dignity in the face of overwhelming odds.' (16) But he also wishes to ensure that agency is recognised as a complex condition. He does not call for its problematization, but he advises that approaches to agency should be cautious. As a result, the book has the tense air about it of celebrating something different while setting out its inhibitions. It is both wonderful and frustrating reading. Yet Chabal is probably right. Precisely because of this, and because of the tension it generates, it falls to Chabal to

demonstrate a means of negotiating it. In particular, he needs to negotiate whether agency changes when suffering and when smiling. There is, however, a lot of suffering in his book, and relatively little smiling.

Smiling is reflective, when not putting a brave face on suffering, of pleasure. But this expands and problematizes Chabal's account of dignity in the face of HIV. The dignity allows, perhaps demands, denial. But denial is not something simple. In the face of suffering, the last redoubts of pleasure are to be safeguarded against any amelioration, censure or demand for change or even its obliteration. There is a crossover here, and it is in the realm of crossover that Chabal is weakest.

Why deny in the face of death? Here, the twentieth century fixation with forms of psychoanalytic understanding suggests a future project. What Paul Ricoeur called an 'ontology of disproportion' is what may be said to be at work in the case of denial which derives from opposed sites of pleasure and suffering unto death. There may be, in Pascal's term, a 'wounded *cogito*' at work – where traditional joy in sex, in pleasure, confronts what is, in its current deadly form anyway, a modern pandemic. At this intersection between traditional practice and modern demands, the *cogito* knows what is going on, but is wounded and will not change. The clash between old and new has induced an ontology of disproportion.

Now all this must be taken with care. Contemporary neo-Freudian approaches to the Western malaise cannot be superimposed upon Africa. But this is not to say that there is not, within the rubric of suffering and pleasure, scope for African-based explorations of what ontology, and agency in their positive, benign and malign forms can mean.

The Chabal thesis is essentially that there are small-scale environmental formations of ontological responses to new systemic and structural forces; and, sometimes, retreats from these forces into behavioural enclaves derived or deduced from tradition. These formations and retreats may be *logical* responses to pressures, though not *rational* in modern universal senses. What the Chabal book accomplishes as a contribution, therefore, to 'world political theories' is the following:



1. It is a contribution to the ongoing largely Western-centred debate on the primacy of either ontology or epistemology. Chabal's is an ontological claim with diverse epistemological considerations.

2. It is a statement that, although acted upon, the African is not acted upon *structurally*, i.e., not acted upon to the extent that he/she will respond in terms of what the structure expects.

3. It is a constructivist statement, but one which is not a universal statement of constructivism. Chabal's discourse/s are varied and not 'rational' in terms of universal systems of thought.

4. It suggests, perhaps with its stress on the psychological, inflects – and it is this inflection I have taken up – the possibility of work along psychoanalytic lines. There is a wounded *cogito*, but this should not be seen in neo-Freudian Lacanian or Kristevan terms – except where pleasure and smiling reflect forms of *jouissance*, the slightly or more fully guilty sense of pleasure that carries in this case a stamp of personal accomplishment and, in that sense, of authenticity, even if it means death.

None of this may be what Chabal intended. What I want to say is that his book contributes to wider, non-Africanist debate. It is a serious contribution to such debate, but it also reveals the paucity of contemporary conceptual apparatus in Africanist studies that still relies on forms of social anthropology and reductionist forms of political science. For its possibility of broadening social science so that it takes seriously African examples and conditions, alongside those more familiar to the West, for its critique of established thought within a great deal of the Africanist community, and for the agendas it opens up, this book continues the 'tradition' begun by *Africa Works*. I think it is a wonderful and powerful book.

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**PATRICK CHABAL: AN APPRECIATION?**

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Memorial University, where I studied as an undergraduate, has a library in the modern brutalist tradition with long, towering shelves that dwarf readers. The African politics section ran along a low shelf on the third floor, and I have a vivid recollection of finding Chabal's edited *Political Domination in Africa*, in 1992, and sitting down between the rows to read it, captivated by the ideas contained inside. Chabal's *Power in Africa*, with its clarion call 'to understand politics is ... to understand relations of power in their historical settings', further inspired me (Chabal 1994: 5). This seemed to me to be an agenda for making sense of both the specificity, yet also the similarities of

African states' trajectories in the post-colonial period, and for making sense of how politics operated at the level of the NGOs, churches and social movements which I was studying. Chabal also drew inspiration, as I did, from the philosopher Charles Taylor's call for a hermeneutic approach to political science research, eschewing claims to prediction or model-building in favour of searching out inter-subjective meanings and understanding (Chabal 1971).

I want to argue here, however, that Chabal is his own worst enemy. His failure to take up his own challenge and follow the agenda set out, irredeemably weakens his ability to convincingly set out a theory of African politics. In what follows, I re-read and consider his monographs and edited collections, concluding that the 'level of analysis' and argumentation precludes a convincing elaboration. Ultimately, and ironically, it is a problem of method.

Chabal's Amilcar Cabral study is derived from his Cambridge Ph.D., and reveals a detailed and thoughtfully assessed account of Cabral's life and thinking, nicely contextualised against the politics of the day. It is a classic political biography – a surprisingly rare form in African studies. Like his other work, this was probably considered deeply unfashionable at the time. It is based on a remarkable range of primary sources and interviews, and is by far Chabal's most empirically grounded research. Yet, as is inevitable in preparing a biography of a political individual, these are highly selective, elite interviews.

Chabal's next two books – one edited and one single-authored – set out his agenda much more clearly. In language that will sound familiar to readers of his more recent work, Chabal introduces *Political Domination in Africa* as 'an attempt to think afresh about politics in Africa (rather than African Politics)...it suggests a new approach to the analysis of political theory and practice in Africa...grounded in universal political theory' (1986: 1). This is an important and under-appreciated collection, but it sits firmly in the tradition of 'good old Africanist political science', with contributions by many of the 'grand old men' of the Euro-American tradition, including Lonsdale, Sklar, Cruise O'Brien, Bayart, and Callaghy.

*Power in Africa* takes these themes further in a monograph form, critiquing existing political science (though at times parodying it), and emphasising important points about the links between ‘power and production’ and ‘legitimacy and representation’ and an important, and I think ultimately correct, emphasis on ‘the dialectics of hegemonic drive’ and ‘the reproduction of power’. Despite this, the book is problematic as either an engagement with colleagues, or a possible resource for teaching. Let me illustrate this with respect to his chapter about civil society, in which he acknowledges his debt to Bayart, but fails to take on board Bayart’s lessons, either in examples or in methodology. Chabal identifies civil society as ‘a vast ensemble of constantly changing groups and individuals whose only common ground is their exclusion from the state’ (Chabal 1994: 83). He writes further that the post-colonial state ‘has sought since independence to capture as much of civil society as it can manage [while] civil society...seeks to evade or undermine such capture’ (Chabal 1994: 84). While such a depiction may ring true for parts of West Africa (for example see Chazan 1988) studies of eastern and southern Africa reveal a very different, and much more complex relationship between women’s leagues (Zambia and Kenya provide good examples), NGOs (Kenya and Zimbabwe), churches (Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe) and ruling regimes. These relationships are best understood in terms of hegemony and counter-hegemonic contestation, but their relationships are complex, multi-faceted, and shaped by resources, values, individuals and history. Bayart’s insight as to the ‘inter-penetration’ of state and society is much more useful in helping us understand these phenomena, and surely this is what Gramsci understood too? An ethnographic approach to NGOs and churches, which enables us to make these arguments, has emerged gradually since the 1990s (Kelsall and Igoe 2005). Yet a similar ethnographic approach to the state (or more accurately states) is still under development – although a project directed by Thomas Bierschenk at Mainz and Mahaman Tidjani Alou in Niamey seems very promising.

My point is not that Chabal is necessarily wrong – many of his points are pertinent – but without a common empirical reference frame we simply cannot even engage in debate about the

significance of ‘capture’ versus ‘interpenetration’ in making sense of relationships between political actors. Not only are we rarely given sufficient detail, but references are sparse and get sparser in each successive book. In a previous, rather unforgiving review of *Africa Works*, I suggested that this slid uncomfortably close to plagiarism, but now I find it frustrating because rather than stimulating scholarly debate – as Chabal intends – it stifles it, preventing engagement rather than privileging it.

On a more empirical note, Chabal’s chapters in *A History of Lusophone Africa* are resolutely descriptive – nearly all analysis is couched in footnotes (see *Power in Africa* and *Africa Works*). The structure and focus conforms to my own prejudices – from ‘the creation of nation states’ to ‘the limits of nationhood’ – and being little acquainted with Lusophone politics, I found it an instructive read. But this empirical foray remains resolutely geared to high politics. There is nothing here of the ‘everyday politics’ of the state, of ‘politics from below’, nor even the roles played by discourse, music and culture in shaping these states. It is not that Chabal is unable to ‘do’ culture – *Post-colonial Literature* shows his ease with written cultural materials. But somehow the cultural and other empirical material, which presumably forms the basis of his understanding of Africa, are bifurcated from analysis and from theorising. This same odd disjuncture emerges in *Suffering and Smiling* where, apart from the title’s attribution to Fela Kuti, lacks engagement with ‘popular culture’ or indeed with ‘politics as it is played out in everyday life’ (xi; see also 185) .

Chabal’s work makes sense for me as a political scientist because the key themes resonate so clearly with my own struggle to make sense of politics in which power and culture clearly matter so much. But to me the understanding of both power and culture suggest an essential need to interpret the local and the proximate, because of the way in which they are constituted and experienced. Certainly there are commonalities in the way people experience domination, and react to it – as observers have documented in workerist Italy (Gramsci), peasant Malaysia (Scott) and the Appalachians (Gaventa). But these cases and their analysis only make sense when methodologies are developed that enable observers to interpret the meanings embedded in the political context. Again I

cannot but agree with Chabal's insistence in *Culture Troubles* that political science must take culture seriously, and pay attention to music, literature and discourse, but I am baffled by his insistence in *Suffering and Smiling* that Africanist political science is typified by 'large N' studies (2009: 176) ignoring the efforts of scholars based in the US, Europe and Africa who carry out much more grounded, interpretative research. As an editor of an African studies journal which publishes mostly political science research, my experience has been that only a tiny fraction of our submissions derive from 'large N' studies. By far the most important publications in recent years – by scholars both established and emerging – draw on descriptive, interpretative methods foregrounding the understanding of local realities and making sense of day to day politics, embedded in global networks and tensions.

Chabal's determination to emphasize the uniquely 'African' characteristics, similarly stands at odds with more common explanations of what makes either for diversity across Africa or difference from elsewhere. *Culture Troubles*, Chabal and Daloz's attempt to speak to the broader political science audience and to consider non-African politics, foregrounds discussions of different 'National' cultures, which seems to generate an image of a homogenous cultural unit, bounded by political or geographical boundaries (Chabal and Daloz 2006). Ironically, it is exactly the studies of 'power' that have revealed remarkable differences in political cultures within states – thinking again here of Gaventa, who showed how marginalised Appalachian mining communities were from mainstream American political culture, despite existence within the modern, developed US. When I put this concern to Chabal he accepted this critique, saying,

Your point is well taken and, no, it is not developed sufficiently in the book.

There was no intention to suggest that only 'national' cultures mattered, even if I can see now how the examples might have given that idea. The key is to keep an open mind. It is the opposite from classifying people according to supposed 'national' characteristics. (personal communication).

The problem here seems to me not just one of drawing boundaries and making labels, but one of actually *applying* the called-for methodological approach. Chabal aspires to ‘get at the stuff of politics from below, or rather from within’ (ix) to ‘fix my camera at eye-level and engage with politics as it is played out in everyday life... [to eschew] ... the macro for the micro, the high for the low, the elite for the ordinary’ (xi), yet without taking up this sort of research, his accounts seem to dead-end in the very generalizations that he is at pains to avoid.

Chabal’s critique of comparative politics makes for stimulating reading and confirms most of my own prejudices. But it is weakened by his reluctance to cite political science literature, either critically or admiringly. So in *Suffering and Smiling*, we are told ‘I want to make a remark about Africanist political science. The main limitation of the way it approaches this question [networking] is the fact that it confines it to the realm of the informal’ (136). But just as we are never told who does these ‘large-N’ studies, similarly we are never told who sees ‘the informal’ as ‘a subversion of and ...antithetical to, the proper and desirable functioning of the state’ (137).

How can we have an engaged, productive debate – either in classes or the pages of journals – if we do not know where data is being drawn from, nor who is being criticised? More worrying are the very general claims made, some of which I disagree with, but which are impossible to debate without any specifics. Chabal rarely engages with either of the cases with which I am most familiar – Zimbabwe or Eritrea – neither of which fit his stereotypes well. But his discussion of youth (154) – an area in which I have little expertise – seems particularly egregious in view of a Ph.D. I recently had the opportunity to read. In *Suffering and Smiling*, an emotive portrait is painted of dehumanisation, degradation, the collapse of shared values, and the breakdown of social order (no, this is not Robert Kaplan). And while such dreadful conditions may be true in some places on the continent, I cannot but compare it to Rosemary Okoli’s study of children who ‘sell market’ in southern Nigeria. Challenging her original assumptions, her research revealed that these children are not homeless or being ‘exploited’ rather they were living with their families, attending school, and



self-motivated (Okoli 2009). Life was not easy for these children, some had experienced unhappy experiences of fostering, others reported harassment from male touts, and all aspired to be treated with more respect, but they were by no means 'degraded', cut adrift from social values or living in a 'culture of brutality'. While my 'specific' example does not invalidate the broader argument that youth militia are found in many countries, including Nigeria, with devastating consequences, I hope that this illustration explains my unease with a structure of argument which precludes the need for referencing or evidence.

Although it is daunting to attempt to summarize a densely argued project extending across four major monographs, my understanding of Chabal's project is threefold. He proposes to make Africanist political science more interpretative, and more theoretical. In attempting to achieve these two aims, he is drawn to political anthropology, which is characterised by both of these. He is correct to argue that such studies must examine what politics *means* to those living in African states, and how they understand their relationship to states and the plethora of non-state actors; in anthropology this is done through thick description and embedded participant observation. It is this methodological point which Chabal attempts to sidestep in the interests of grand theory. But if we consider the most successful attempts to political anthropology we see that it is by moving from the particular to the universal that theorising is made possible, as Jim Ferguson (1994a) and others have shown. Ferguson's work has, of course, generated its own controversies (e.g. Ferguson 1990a, 1990b, 1994b; MacMillan 1993, 1996), but those debates themselves have been fruitful in developing our thinking and perspectives on research, as well as on power relations and communities within Africa.

Two further omissions that emerged from my submersion in Chabal's oeuvre are perhaps worth highlighting. First, there is surprisingly little discussion of international factors. An undergraduate student who is a big fan of *Africa Works* had just one question upon reading *Suffering and Smiling* – what about China? He mostly wanted a good line to stick in his thesis, but the point stands: even if we discount 'dependency' approaches, surely we can not understand African politics

without giving some thought to how the relations of extraversion may be changed by changing international circumstances? More surprising to me, on re-reading was just how male-centric the analysis was. *Power in Africa*, *Africa Works*, and *The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*, are all books about men. In contrast, *Culture Troubles* has a number of index entries for ‘gender and gender studies’, but the discussion remains rather disappointingly elusive.

Political science of Africa, and African studies more generally, both suffer from a weakness of theory, and Chabal’s efforts to remedy this must be appreciated – they are certainly a more stimulating read than most ‘Introduction to African Studies’ textbooks currently on the bookshelves. Where Chabal’s brilliance lies, it seems to me, is in identifying and naming the weaknesses of contemporary political science of Africa, and beyond. In so doing, however, he fails to acknowledge the strengths, which exist side-by-side with these weaknesses – either by acknowledging the diversity of political science, and the existing calls for ‘interpretative’ political science, or by paying tribute to the many political scientists of Africa, on whose work he builds. Not only does this come across as uncharitable, but it actually weakens his argument, because he denies himself the empirical base on which to build grand theory.

And thus, the flaws in his attempt to pursue his project are of his own making. Rather than taking his own agenda seriously, he flounders in a morass of mid-level theorising from which his analysis cannot but emerge as partial. Ironically, perhaps, it is this sort of mid-level study that ‘standard’ comparative politics does reasonably well, while, as Chabal has demonstrated, as a discipline we should be taking the ‘every-day’ politics more seriously, and also challenging ourselves towards theory-building, grounded in our *understanding* and *interpretation* of the cases at hand.

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## **HOW AFRICAN IS AFRICA? PATRICK CHABAL AND THE LIMITS OF AREA STUDIES**

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Patrick Chabal's new book is an interesting and valuable attempt at synthesis and offers a useful defence of the meaningfulness of 'reasonable' generalization in discussions of history, culture and political development in Africa. Chabal is critical of 'unreasonable' generalizations that have been (and continue to be) commonplace in Afro-pessimist political science (Jackson and Rosberg 1982; Sandbrook 1985; Bayart 1989; Zartman 1995; Collier 2009).<sup>1</sup> Such approaches are replete with ideological denunciations of African corruption, backwardness and the continent's incapacity to develop politically and economically because of a particular political culture and an unchangeable framework of traditions. For analytical purposes, however, Chabal makes the case for extracting a set of common features that apply generally to a discussion of Africa as a whole. In order to contribute to such a discussion, he invokes a 'cultural approach' or 'interpretation of meanings', which aims at 'avoiding ossifying dichotomies such as "tradition" and "modernity" [and instead] calls for an explanation of change that looks at how specific "modernities" [in Africa] are rooted in their own "traditions" ' (p. 86).

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<sup>1</sup> *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling* does not have footnotes, but I suppose Afro-pessimist 'classics' would include Jackson and Rosberg's *Personal Rule in Black Africa* (1982), Sandbrook's *The Politics of Africa's Economic Stagnation* (1985), Bayart's *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (1989), and Zartmann's *Collapsed States* (1995). That Afro-pessimism can also be indulged in by economists is demonstrated by Paul Collier, for example in his 'The Trouble with Elections' article in the *Wall Street Journal* on 16 June 2009.

This sounds like a reasonable argument, and I am not disputing the usefulness of generalization in principle, nor the possibility of developing theories concerning the particularities of modernity in Africa or of an ‘African modernity’ or set of ‘African modernities’. But I do think there may be limitations involved; firstly, in choosing a focus that brings out what African countries, societies and polities have in common, rather than one which aims at highlighting their mutual differences, relations, and conflicts between them, and at comparing and mapping out connections and the development of connections.

Secondly, I think there are limitations – and this represents a challenge to our understanding of what constitutes African Studies – in focussing on Africa in separation from the global connections and transcontinental relations in which African societies are embedded, and also from the dynamics through which this embeddedness is developing. While it is certainly interesting to compare, for example, how democratic politics and the role of ethnicity within politics have developed differently in, say, Ghana, Kenya, and Zimbabwe, it is no less interesting or important to compare how different levels of nationalist understanding and mobilisation have interacted in, say, South Africa, India, and Latin American countries, or how the politics of affirmative action and graduated citizenship are acting themselves out comparatively within these different contexts. The scope of approaches to area studies is rapidly becoming too limited, and incapable of assisting us in understanding the unfolding of a whole new world of South-South dynamics. How China and India, for example, are becoming major powers in Africa, how Malaysia is used as an example for population management and empowerment policies, or how Brazilian trade unions and civil society reforms contribute new visions for public deliberation and redistribution in Africa.

Thirdly, I think we may be misled by focussing too much on the ‘Africanness’ of developments within individual African societies, and by seeing ‘Africanness’ and ‘tradition’ as things people think homogeneously about within such contexts. I would agree with Chabal that there

is little insight to be gained from applying rigid and universalist notions of ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ as analytical concepts. But I think that in his new book he remains committed to an anthropological understanding of culture, and of political culture as something unified within individual African contexts, be they regional, national or local. He claims, for instance, that common understandings of virtue and morality often prevail – notions of accountability, which are not ‘necessarily best served by multiparty electoral means’ – and that notions of ‘western democracy’ are inadequate to Africa (71-2). By contrast, I think that instead of employing ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ as analytical concepts from the outside, we need to study how such concepts are mobilised, given meaning to, and fought about within the specific contexts of African political struggles.

On the one hand, we see ‘tradition’ mobilised in different and contradictory ways, making this a political field in itself within which a plurality of meanings are contested. On the other hand, it is also clear that we have ‘modernity’ brought into the field in a variety of ways, for example, as part and parcel of local political agendas, including demands for accountability and multiparty democracy. Developments in Zimbabwe in this respect are of particular interest – also in comparison with Kenya and South Africa – inasmuch as they demonstrate a political development away from nationalist-front, patrimonialist and ethnicity-based politics towards a popular appreciation of pluralist democracy and multipartyism. Equally interesting are the ways in which such developments have been held back by South African and SADC majority insistence on an ‘Africanist’ solution of ‘consensualist’ unity government – aiming to turn political development in Zimbabwe back to the late 1980s. But you cannot, I think, in the long term, impose a ‘consensual’ solution on a population where a majority opposition and public are disputing the rightfulness, desirability, and indeed ‘Africanness’ of consensual politics – in contrast with what has so far been the case beyond the Limpopo in South Africa, which in some respects is a much more ‘developed’ nation.

In conclusion, Chabal’s book makes an interesting argument and is a valuable incitement to discussion, but it is difficult to see how its ‘cultural approach’ can help in exploring, coming to

terms with, and explaining differences such as those mentioned above. Nor is it clear how it can compliment and integrate the study of transnational and transregional interactions that are becoming increasingly important, and are placing the 'Africanness' of Africa and its politics in a different perspective from that adopted in the book.

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**‘BLEAK MOMENTS’: A NOTE ON CHABAL’S *AFRICA: THE POLITICS OF SUFFERING AND SMILING***

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Patrick Chabal’s book is fascinating and provoking (as usual), and I will respond to the provocation. My words here will not surprise him – they are simply my small, very limited contribution to the debate I think he wanted.

In true Nigerian fashion, let me start by criticizing the title ‘*Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*’. I read through the whole book looking for something on smiling. It is only on the penultimate page (170) of the last chapter before the conclusions that the word occurs for the very first and last time. I know it’s a quotation from a Fela Ransome Kuti song with that title. But I really do think Chabal has missed a serious trick here: he could have discussed seriously for us the politics of joy that can effectively neutralise the politics of suffering. I do not just mean football, dancing, drinking, gambling: I mean more overtly political acts too – for example, there is considerable joy, or at least excitement, even in rioting (so long as you are on the winning side). Laughter has strongly political connotations, as everyone knows: not just cartoons but jokes, songs – ephemera that are more devastating than anything in print. We all know our Rabelais, but in Africa it is not as if laughter has never been analysed – there is Comi Toulabor’s work, for example, on Togo, which Achille Mbembe famously elaborated upon and developed for his ‘Notes on the post-colony’ (1992).

Political humour is old in Africa too – one can pick hints of it up in such an ancient text as the Kano Chronicle. It occurs in spirit-possession rituals in which the various kinds of rulers are



mimicked unsparingly. Nicknames, rumours, caricatures – all the armoury that was honed for modern use against colonial officials – continue to be used against today's politicians. Notoriously, Hausa song can be a devastating weapon – for example, against the old Sarkin Musawa – but so was Fela Ransome Kuti's song against International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT) and by implication against Abiola. Why did Patrick Chabal not examine Fela Ransome Kuti's work for more than a catchy subtitle to his book? It certainly caused an enormous amount of smiling.

My point is that, had Patrick Chabal really been writing-up experiences among the grass-roots of ordinary political life in Africa, his book would have been full of insight into the humour that subverts politicians and the pretences of the powerful. He might also have noticed there were individuals about whom no jokes were possible; mapping in detail people's respect is interesting because it illuminates subtle differences one might otherwise overlook. For example, in the 1960s there were many jokes about the Sardauna of Sokoto (northern Nigeria's Premier), but not one about the elderly Sultan.

I would argue that an essential element of life in Africa is the humour – it is partly that that makes the continent such a delightful place to be a guest in; but it is more subtle than that. Living in a farmstead for two years, I found that laughter, humour, teasing were central not only to the way the women of the farmstead 'managed' me but also, more formally, in the 'joking relationships' that made one individual to be treated differently from another. More impressive was to see, in the different setting of court life, how a subordinate who had committed a serious offence humiliated himself before his boss in expiation: the subordinate would give in public a deliberately stupid 'excuse' at which all the other servants around would laugh; the boss did not laugh but just gave a scornful 'aha'. There are many kinds of smile.

Smiling needs more than the kind of simple analysis that suffering often gets. Both are more subtle, more regulated implicitly: moments of joy are not readily observed by foreigners, certainly not inside the private quarters of a house. Much smiling is (or should be) almost invisible.

For example, a mother has an avoidance relationship with her first-born, yet it was sometimes possible to glimpse (when she thought no one was looking) the pleasure in her face as well as her concern. But even outside too: for example, there are times when a person really must not show her teeth in a smile, though admittedly those women who have come back from the *hajj* to Mecca now grin to show off their new gold teeth. Over-smiling arouses suspicion. A 'good' photograph does not show you smiling.

The emphasis of this book on suffering at the expense of smiling raises a more serious issue: why are 'western' scholars so obsessed with suffering, especially the suffering of others? Is it the strong value given to compassion? Or a sense of guilt for the misery of others? Or an easy way of grand-standing, of expressing a certain benign superiority? I am reminded of one medieval description of Heaven as having a balcony from which the Blessed could enjoy the spectacle below them of the Damned writhing in an excruciating Hell – in Heaven, *schadenfreude* is one of the treats, and is apparently much appreciated. But colleagues in Africa get very fed up with the ceaseless misery that western scholars like to focus upon in their analyses of African daily life as if that was all there was to say about people on the continent. I would argue that the way people manage or simply cope with the hardships of life is as significant – perhaps more significant – to know about and understand than the hardships themselves. How violence is 'healed' (or not) should concern us as much as violence itself. I am suggesting, rather crudely, that since Patrick Chabal's book lies, for me, within a broader western genre of 'misery memoir', any debate we might have about it should also look beyond his particular text.

I do not mean of course that the misery is not there – my question is why our focus has to be on misery alone. And is our emphasis on the misery even ethnographically 'true'? Is misery the pre-occupation of those who are our hosts, even in the slums, the refugee camps, the villages and homesteads where famine or HIV rule? As a genre in western culture, it is old – Jacques Callot's prints of the Thirty Years War, Hogarth's London, Goya's Spain are famous exemplars; but even

older is the emphasis in churches on the crucifixion, on the awful martyrdom of saints – my Muslim colleagues (being *sunni* rather than *shi'i*) find this highlighting of pain for its own sake peculiar: suffering may be redemptive, transformative, but unsurprisingly this explanation seldom appears in analyses of African economies. I am reminded of the study which found that those who witnessed an accident endured more, longer trauma than the person who had the accident and survived. Perhaps as *voyeurs* of suffering we 'suffer' more than those in the thick of it?

One problem, therefore, I had with Patrick Chabal's analysis lay in his use of the blanket term 'Africans' and his willingness to generalize. Most writers have at the back of their minds their archetypal country at a particular point of time – is Patrick's Angola or Zaire, or where? It clearly is not Nigeria, despite it having 25 per cent of the people in Africa: so it is hard for me to criticise his data in any detail. But take one example: population growth and its political effects. The book does not discuss either. In the village area I know well the population over the last 50 years has increased by some 50 times (from 1,500 taxpayers to 75,000 residents). In terms of 'the politics of suffering and smiling', one could argue that lowered child mortality has resulted in hugely more smiles, as mothers no longer lost their babies. But it has also meant that many of the rural young have gone off to the towns leaving their homes remarkably bereft of the laughter and joy (and arguments) that they shared with their sisters or young wives whom they have left behind. In short, the changes in the northern Nigerian world I have come to know quite well are dramatic; and not all the changes are 'bad'.

In chapter 7 Chabal notes that poverty has worsened in the region; that there is more illness, more suffering (conflict, violence), and he argues that this is true in actual, everyday life, at the grassroots. I am not sure what his evidence is – UN statistics rather than anthropological accounts – but surely he knows how UN statistics are constructed? Having been to the same sites in northern Nigeria almost every year since the 1960s, I have to say that poverty, illness, suffering among the people I know has *not* got worse. They have their problems, new ones as well as old ones, of course – and the nature of their social environment has changed in many ways. They have had many sorrows.

But they are far from 'miserable'. Perhaps I move around in communities that are remarkably blessed compared, say, with parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo or Zimbabwe – and perhaps Chabal's book is primarily about *those* parts of Africa. But where my hosts are is far from being 'unique'; huge swathes of rural Africa get by, somehow, despite whatever is thrown at them by God, Allah or capitalism. They endure, and their skills of endurance include the ability to smile, and a remarkable capacity not to complain at what currently hurts – though it can hurt deeply, silently. Patrick Chabal, I know, recognises this – he just does not expatiate on it. Yet the capacity to endure seriously alters people's responses: for example, how rare has been an overt, mass rebellion against poor governance anywhere? And why? Anti-colonial struggles could be organised and fiercely fought despite surveillance; where are today's threats of an uprising? I know politicians who fear one, but they still sleep well enough. Suffering has yet to set off an explosion.

Although this is a characteristically thoughtful, brave book (like a bleak Mike Leigh film), I can only hope that Chabal's future work will be different, but just as brave.

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**AFRICAN POLITICS REVISITED FROM BELOW: CHABAL'S PLEA FOR MORE  
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS IN POLITICAL SCIENCES**

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Many books on politics in Africa start from classical political concepts and focus on questions concerning the state, its constitution, formal rules of the regulation of power, democracy or the existence of civil society. More often than not political processes in Africa are assessed against an idealized benchmark of presumably well functioning Western political systems, which usually produces a long list of deficiencies.

Patrick Chabal follows a different path and tries to reconstruct the elements and notions of political thinking in Africa. He claims to revisit political theories about Africa from a new angle, by analyzing 'grassroots' political processes in Africa and focusing on the intricacies of everyday life. In doing so he tries to capture the logic behind African realities by highlighting the agency of ordinary African people. Through this unorthodox but refreshing approach, Chabal succeeds in his aim to 'bring the people back in' to political analysis and, as a result, his book offers the reader insights that classical political theory cannot provide.

The structure of the book follows an everyday life perspective on politics, and the first chapters represent, according to Chabal, the 'cycle of individual and communal lives from birth to death' (x). Chabal focuses on what he identifies as the 'key aspects of African societies' (x) and the issues emanating from these including 'Being,' 'Belonging,' 'Believing,' 'Partaking,' 'Striving,' 'Surviving,' and, 'Suffering'. These aspects of everyday experience usually turn up in political

science as marginal issues or topics of political debate, whereas Chabal argues that they are driving forces of politics in Africa and should therefore be a central focus of political scientists.

The main strength of the book thus lies in offering a social anthropological way of approaching political issues on the continent following what social anthropologists call the emic (or insider's) perspective. Chabal shows that an understanding of African politics needs a reference to the cultural and historical background set in pre-colonial times as well as a reference to the colonial heritage. At the same time he underlines that African people are – like any other people – rational thinkers who weigh up their political actions by considering the opportunities available to them and potential the consequences of their action (7-16).

In a way, the book provides a political anthropology for beginners. Consequently the references include not only books from political sciences, but also a number of social anthropological works on African politics and social phenomena which are, according to Chabal, part and parcel of political debates in Africa such as identity, the land question, violence and conflict, or witchcraft. However, this is not a social anthropological book; it is neither a monograph based on ethnographic fieldwork, nor a further elaboration of political anthropology. Chabal wants to explain politics in Africa from inside and from below in more general terms and presents a kind of ideal type(s) of patterns of political processes and structures.

A practical advantage of Chabal's approach is that it is well written and at the same time short and concise. Chabal makes his point clear arguing that one should read the book from the front page to its end. The readability is partly the result of his fluent style, and partly the result of the decision not to provide empirical 'proof' for his argument or systematic references in the text. As a result, it offers a serious essay on politics in Africa that presents a clear argument. Not only is Chabal's understanding of politics in Africa provoking, so too is the style and the argumentation itself. Chabal openly invites discussion of the limitations of his approach (xi), yet at the same time he somehow immunises his argument against orthodox critique: he explains in his preface that he

presents a subjective view (ix) and not a general blue print for African politics (x). Acknowledging his empirical shortcomings, Chabal thus asks to be measured by ‘how insightful an account’ his approach provides (xi).

Leaving the problem of methodology aside for a moment, it is important to acknowledge that Chabal succeeds in providing an insightful account into contemporary politics in Africa. His unorthodox approach to the subject allows him to directly address the most pertinent political questions facing African people today. Whilst many observers are preoccupied by a focus on elections and corruption, perhaps the most pressing concerns for ordinary Africans emanate the ‘everyday’ issues that Chabal seeks to highlight such as the land question and the insecurity resulting from violence and poverty. Chabal’s approach thus presents African politics as it is relevant for the people living in Africa. At the same time, it is not restricted to case studies with some limited generalizations as in the case in some well-documented social anthropological or historical works (Cohen & Odhiambo 1992; Lentz 2006, for example). In contrast to such approaches, Chabal presents a more general view which is accessible and, at the very least, opens up the floor for discussion and provokes lively debate.

A book like this is based on generalization and, as such, Chabal does not concern himself with an adherence to rigid precision in empirical details. However, whilst the generalization helps Chabal to clarify his main argument, the readers of the book should be aware that this sometimes leads him into the trap of oversimplification and reduction. I will now highlight some of these examples but I will later conclude that addressing his empirical shortcomings would require an entirely new format for the book; one that would undermine the contribution Chabal makes to Africanist debate in this latest offering.

For social anthropologists the main points in the book cannot be new. Indeed, as I have already argued, much of the book provides what might be thought of as a political anthropology for beginners. At the same time, however, anthropologists will miss anthropology. The strength of

anthropological studies lies in ethnographic description grounded in the detailed analysis of specific localities, yet Chabal's book does not concern itself with empirical proof of this nature. This makes it difficult for Chabal to adequately support his call for political scientists to adopt a more anthropological focus for their studies, embracing the kind of methodological approaches outlined by Clifford Geertz in his concept of 'thick description'. He argues that political scientists need to acknowledge the importance of what he identifies as the 'key aspects of African societies', yet this claim remains rather abstract. Anthropologists understand what Chabal means when he refers to the role of witchcraft in politics, yet this is not explained to readers who are unfamiliar with social anthropology and as a result they are left to simply accept Chabal's assertion of its importance rather than being convinced by evidence to support his claim. This is not just a question of methodology, but also a question of how his arguments can be presented to non-anthropologists. The use of some empirical examples supported with references to the work of other scholars would have helped to bridge that gap.

The same holds true for religion. A whole chapter named 'The Politics of Believing' is dedicated to questions of religion in which Chabal discusses the important roles of ancestors, the spiritual world, and witchcraft in everyday African life. But what is missing is at least a short explanation as to how these elements work together. The classical work of Evans-Pritchard (1965) is mentioned but without a presentation of its main argument. The reference to African history and tradition is very important, but it is risky because it opens the door for a cultural determinism. This is unintentional but a reader not familiar with ethnographic diversity might come to such a conclusion. Again, some examples to illustrate diversity would have helped.

In some parts of Chabal's book his generalizations are misleading. For example, there are many references to the important role that clientelism played in pre-colonial times. However, this ignores the fact that in many parts of Africa we find segmentary lineage societies (so called 'tribes without rulers', Middleton & Tate 1958) where clientelism was not a main feature. These societies



practiced other forms of social exchange like balanced or generalized reciprocity. I also disagree with Chabal regarding the role that clientelism plays as a feature of modern African politics. I would argue instead that clientelism is very well suited to any redistributive system including chiefdoms and kingdoms, but also the modern territorial state. This is particularly significant in cases where a territorial state has additional resources to redistribute such as development aid or rents from mineral resources. Indeed, clientelism gains importance even in regions where in pre-colonial times segmentary lineage societies without strong clientelistic structures were apparent. In these cases, clientelism is a modern phenomenon. It should also be noted in this regard that democratic elections work well with clientelism: they facilitate competition between different patron-client systems and offer the national resources for the winning patron-client system. Therefore the question is not why we find clientelism in modern African states, but under which circumstances it loses importance.

Chabal's point is that we can understand African politics only when we refer to its cultural and historical roots: that politicians have to adapt to obligations in the local communities and that they have to take in account local authorities like chiefs. This is correct, but we should not overlook that today local political structures with chiefs, kings or council of elders are influenced by the existence of the state. What we find as seemingly 'traditional' institutions are modern versions of older institutions or even new institutions in a traditional 'garb'. Christian Lund (2006) uses the expression of 'twilight institutions' to refer to this phenomenon. The interplay between the state and local institutions is a striking feature of current politics in Africa.

Chabal neglects another important element of change that is increasingly influencing political debates in Africa: the role of a burgeoning middle class. This growing demographic cohort is particularly important in countries such as Kenya, Ghana or the Côte d'Ivoire where it is large enough to play a significant role in society and politics. This middle class is constituted by well-educated professionals who are partly still bound by ties of kin, ethnicity and locality to their community, but who also have an identity as self-confident citizens. In their notion of politics they refer to civil

liberties, human rights and democracy and form the core of an emerging civil society. The existence of this group triggers a debate about political processes in their countries, but it does not mean that Africa will become a simple copy of Western democracy: their liberal understanding of politics is challenged by 'traditionalists' and ethnic nationalists who refer to tradition and a sense of origin and autochthony to claim political rights and protected land rights. This debate inside African societies is a part of African politics that should not be ignored.

The book deliberately tries not to start from conventional concepts. Chabal shows in very concise overviews the limits and shortcomings of former and classical conceptualisations. Even when he generalizes his critique, Chabal raises some extremely erudite points with this argument. One of the strengths of the book is that he offers his own way of systematising the politics of everyday life experiences. But as a sociologist I miss at least a short conceptual discussion and clarification of his concepts. This is most obvious when it comes to modernity. Chabal makes numerous references to 'modern politics' (50, 52ff), the 'modern world' or 'modern norms' (67, 69, 71), to 'modern forms of colonial governance' (89, 91) or to the 'process of modernisation' or 'modernity' (157), yet he does not explicitly situate himself within the broader debates of the concept of modernity and its application in studies of Africa. For example, in the anthropological debate, Eisenstadt's term of 'multiple modernities' is sometimes extended to a broader notion that nearly every contemporary society is 'modern' (see Geschiere, Meyer & Pels 2008). For Eisenstadt (2000), modernity is a social figuration with specific features. However, Chabal does not position himself in such debates and the concept is treated fairly inconsistently – mostly modernity is written in inverted commas, sometimes not. Interestingly, modernity is not mentioned in the index either. His discussion of violence and conflict is also problematic. In the chapter titled 'The Politics of Suffering', Chabal makes the important distinction between violence and conflict. However, in my view, how this is done is not helpful. Patrick Chabal wants to show that there is violence that does not derive from conflict, and in so doing refers to 'the violence of calculated neglect' (which reminds me of Galtung's (1969)

‘structural violence’). At the same time, conflict is practically linked to violence. With this use of the terms he misses the chance to discuss non-violent ways of conflict management.

One of Chabal’s core points is that if we want to understand African politics we have to consider specific African cultural elements (religion and the role of ancestors) and the peculiarities of the colonial state. This is true, but what is specifically African about this? In Asia we find ancestor cults, local chiefs and kings who have been incorporated into the colonial system, and clientelism and corruption are well known. In the end it remains unclear what is so peculiar about the African situation: no attempt at a systematic comparative approach is made in Chabal’s book. At the very least some hints for the comparison could have been made in the introduction or in the conclusion.

The critical points mentioned should not conceal the strength of the book. The decision to ignore the quest for evidence and proof allows Chabal to present a straightforward and clear argument that provides an innovative view on African politics, starting with problems and issues relevant in everyday life, at the same time demonstrating the links of political dynamics to African culture and history. This sets a necessary counterpoint to rigid comparative approaches which usually tend to suppress phenomena like witchcraft or the emotive question of land (‘The Politics of Belonging’ and ‘The Politics of Origin’). Works like Chabal’s book trigger new discussions and give the requisite food for thought to develop new hypotheses that are not derived from a Northern-Atlantic view on politics.

The critical points mentioned are the other side of the coin: If one wants to make a clear point one risks simplification for the sake of the argument. A consequent reaction to these objections would be to call for a pedantically documented work protected behind a wall of empirical evidence. However, above all, this book will be read and, more importantly, it will succeed in Chabal’s aim of provoking vibrant discussion.

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**DROWNING NOT WAVING: COMMENTS ON *AFRICA: THE POLITICS OF SUFFERING AND SMILING***

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Patrick Chabal's new book is an interesting contribution to the literature on understanding the realities of contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. There is very little that I disagree with when Chabal confines his comments to the nature of the state in Africa and how politics is actually practised. He is spot-on in disentangling the hybridity of institutions and the informalisation of politics and in capturing many of the nuances of everyday life on the continent. Most African states house hybrid regimes wherein the informal mechanisms of political authority coexist with the formal trappings of the modern state such as a bureaucracy, written laws and the institutions of a Weberian legal-rational system. These regimes are hybrids because the governing elites rely upon the trappings of a rational-legal order even as they consistently subvert it for their own advantage. Daily government thus resembles a balancing act to maintain a degree of political stability by satisfying the regime's supporters and weakening its opponents.

The nature of legitimacy and his comments on reciprocity are without doubt insightful, echoing van de Walle's (2001) claim that political authority is often based on the giving and gaining of favours in an endless series of dyadic exchanges that go from the village level to the highest reaches of the central state. Chabal's comments on the meaning of politics are equally apposite. As Chabal notes, 'politics is not just about power, the ability to induce others to do what one wants; it is also the display of a collective "virtue"' (47). As most observers note, resources extracted from the

state or the economy are deployed as the means to maintain support and legitimacy within most African systems, with the result that the control of the state is often equivalent to the control of resources which, in turn, is crucial for remaining a Big Man. Big Men utilize wealth (often secured corruptly) to show that they are more of a munificent father figure than their opponents. As Ahmadou Kourouma wryly notes in his fictitious treatment of an African president:

[The president] must appear to be the wealthiest man in the land. There is no future, no influence to be had in independent Africa for he who wields supreme executive power if he does not parade the fact that he is the richest and most generous man in his country. A true, great African leader gives gifts, ceaselessly, every day (2003: 221).

One of the fundamental problems in post-colonial Africa is that the ruling classes lack hegemony. As Fatton (1988: 34) notes, ‘the absence of a hegemonic bourgeoisie, grounded in a solid and independent economic base and successfully engaged in a private accumulation of capital, has transformed politics into material struggle’. Despite Chabal’s assertion to the contrary, I believe it is possible to talk of a ruling class in Africa, namely the top political elites and bureaucrats, the leading members of the liberal professions, the nascent bourgeoisie and the top members of the security arms of the state (Markovitz 1987: 8). These constitute a powerful bloc within society and though alliances shift and change on a regular basis, the recycling of elites – a phenomenon that dominates most politics in Africa – suggests resilience and a coherence that cannot be easily dismissed. Early years of nationalism may have been an attempt to build a hegemonic project, but this quickly collapsed into autocracy and failure. Moral and political modes that transcend confined notions of economic-corporate interests and instead reflect freer ‘ethico-political’ ones are generally absent. Thus the ethico-political aspect, which in a hegemonic project serves to assist in building economic configurations but also supplies a justifying and legitimizing aspect, is lacking. As a result, the ruling classes’ domination and their modalities of governance are expressed through both the threat and

actual use of violence *and* the immediate disbursement of material benefits to supporters in neo-patrimonial regimes.

Without these twin strategies – both inimical to long-term development and stability – the African ruling elites cannot rule. But this non-hegemonic rule inevitably leads to despotism and unpredictability – the latter of course being anathema to the construction of a stable regional project *and* capitalism. In fact, most African states are trapped in a circle of under-development, which stimulates societal conflict. Elites may control the state but it is a state that their own practices undermine and subvert on a daily basis. In these circumstances, it is rather more suffering than smiling (Fatton 1988).

Chabal's book is important because it challenges the Pollyannas who posit that liberalism is the answer to the continent's problems. Such advocates advance that development can be 'private-driven' and that what African bourgeoisie that does exist will abruptly transform themselves from their historical role of compradors and parasites to that of being the catalysts for economic take-off. As Chabal notes, *homo economicus*, making 'rational' economic decisions independent of any societal and contextual milieu, is a myth. In fact, those policies announced or endorsed by state elites will almost always end up being controlled and directed – even by the ostensibly virtuous 'private sector' – in the service of those who seek to preserve clientelism and patrimonialism and the advantages that accrue from such systems. The losers, of course, will continue to be the ordinary African citizen.

Clearly, neo-liberal development strategies that prioritize economic growth over social progress has been politically destabilizing. The nature of the African state itself may be located as a prime explanatory site of blame. Neoliberal market stimulus is deemed to have failed in Africa not because of an organized citizenry whose demands cannot be satisfied, but rather because of the multifaceted and predatory nature of the African state. Thus Hibou (1999: 93) asserts that neoliberalism has and will fail in Africa because it does not take into account the nature of the state

and the informal nature of its activities as an economic actor. In striving to constrain formal state actors to put a stop to corruption and rent-seeking, neoliberals have inadvertently granted more power to the informal sector, which has a tendency to be not only actively involved in 'rent-seeking' as well but also 'criminal' by many common understandings of the term. In such circumstances, neoliberalism helps (further) undermine formal state institutions in Africa whilst stimulating 'the development of personal networks, of informal or even illegal practices' (ibid: 93).

I am unsure of where the book's analysis of the informal leads us. Often, 'alternative' formulations of the state in Africa, which may take the form of emphasizing the informal and those activities outside of the 'normal' functions of the state as a solution to the continent's impasse, are somewhat problematic. As Leys (1994: 36) remarks:

Contrary to the wishful thinking of some observers [the increase in the informal] is part of the pathology of Africa's collapse, not a seedbed of renewal. Anyone who believes that, for example, carrying sacks of cocoa beans on bicycles along devious forest tracks to sell them illegally across the frontier is more promising for the economy than taking them directly to the port by truck, is not to be taken seriously. People resort to the second economy for survival, to escape the predations of the corrupt and parasitic state machinery, that is all; they bribe the police to look the other way, they pay no tax, and the roads still get worse.

It is surely not Western centric to believe that such scenarios are overall negative and, certainly that in such circumstances, Africa is *not* working, at least not in any sensible definition of the term.

However, there are two aspects of the book that I must take issue with. The first is the claim to reject a priori theoretical frameworks. Chabal asserts that his book represents a 'systematic attempt to comprehend and convey what makes sense to people at the local level without prior ideological or theoretical agenda' (173). This is impossible. Reflections on the role and status of



theory lie at the heart of academia. All scholars believe this to be so, with Robert Cox asserting that 'we cannot define a problem in global politics without presupposing a certain basic structure consisting of the significant kinds of entities involved and the form of significant relationships among them' (Cox 1992: 76) i.e., theory-building. Without a prior ideological or theoretical agenda, what is Chabal's epistemological foundation? And what are the ontological assumptions behind the book? The book is organised into seven aspects of politics on the continent, but these by themselves reflect Chabal's prior theoretical agenda. There is nothing wrong with the author's choices, but one could easily have focussed on other aspects of politics on the continent. Why did Chabal choose the seven that he did? Because of ontological notions that in themselves were bound up with his theoretical commitments. Chabal comes dangerously close to adopting an indefensible positivist stance whereby (unlike everybody else) his work is an objective value-free enquiry and a statement of what is, not his or anyone else's values or subjective feelings.

This brings me to the second problem I have with the book and that is namely the rather simplistic caricaturing of the Africanist community. The book is written so as to advance the idea (or at least give the impression) that, with the sole exception of Professor Chabal, everyone else has got it wrong on Africa. Thus 'much Africanist political analysis continues to limit research to a small number of broad "sociological" factors – such as ethnicity, religion and occupation – which are both too general and too limiting' (31). Africanists have 'often merely presumed that ethnicity was the key cause of violence' (32). '[M]ost political theories of Africa rehearse the same arguments about the primacy of certain forms of identification, especially ethnicity' (42). Really? This is not the Africanist community that I am familiar with, whose work is rich in nuance, tone and insight.

Chabal asserts that 'the most common blind spot among Africanist political scientists is the assumption that African leaders are merely corrupt dictators because they are not elected, or not elected properly, and because they ostensibly abuse their office' (50). Which Africanists promote such a crude analysis? I have never read that outside of the popular media (to be grossly unfair to the

world of journalism). Who are these naïve reductionists who have got it all wrong? In fact, Chabal ascribes a generic position onto the Africanist community as the key point of departure for his book that few (very few) actually adhere to. In doing so, he distracts us from the mainly positive aspects of his work and by creating this straw man to heroically demolish, his claims (none of which are referenced, incidentally) become doubtful. Not least is the declaration that he has ‘offered a methodology that does not draw on Africanist political theory as it has been practised in the last few decades’ (182). Other than an eclectic Catholicism i.e., interdisciplinary research, I am unsure what is distinct about Chabal’s methodology. And given that the book builds on his *Africa Works* (Chabal and Daloz, 1999), which in itself was a reprisal of understandings of neo-patrimonial modalities of governance, the claim that he rejects Africanist political theory ‘as it has been practised in the last few decades’ does not stand up.

This is not to detract from the overall volume. It is insightful and adds to the literature on contemporary Africa and is warmly recommended. Chabal’s defence of non-African Africanists and his robust vindication of the possibility of generalizations are welcome and useful. His evident need to needlessly (and groundlessly) rubbish everyone else’s work on the continent notwithstanding, Patrick Chabal remains one of the key thinkers on the politics of sub-Saharan Africa and the book will be a point of departure for many interesting debates in the future.

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## **CHABAL AND POLITICAL SCIENCE**

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Patrick Chabal has written a broad overview of African politics and African social relations. There is a lot in his book I agree with, and a lot I find interesting. My comments will focus on the book's critique of the discipline of political science, since the book directs a stinging critique at my chosen discipline and, to a lesser extent, at contemporary economics. In his critique, Chabal appears to want to define what Africanist area studies should be about in the future, and I want to offer a discussion of his claims, because I do not agree with his view of either the discipline of political science or what it can offer Africanist area studies.

Let me firstly say something of the tone and the writing of the book. On one level, the conversational and nuanced tone is quite pleasing, as is the absence of jargon – a real plague for so much academic writing these days. I also appreciate Patrick's utilitarian and pragmatic approach to theory, which reminds me of Albert Hirschman's compelling argument (1965) that the search for paradigms too often constitute “a hindrance to understanding” and that's something that I have always taken very seriously. Theories should help us expand knowledge and understanding, yet too often they actually blind us to certain realities, so I very much agree with the spirit of his argument and his approach to argumentation.

The disadvantage of this approach – something that I will return to at the end of my comments – is that there are very few empirical details in this book. There are a handful of examples but this is a text of mostly theory with broad assertions that are rarely backed up with any evidence.

There are few citations to other people's work – there are only perhaps a dozen such citations in the entire book – so Chabal will often use phrases such as 'some people have argued that...' about scholars who remain unidentified and, indeed, unidentifiable. Finally, his informal rhetorical style means that there is little or no clear hypothesis testing, no 'I hypothesize that...' followed by a clear declarative sentence. As a result, the actual empirical claims he is making about Africa are often quite hard to pin down, despite the suggestive language. I will return to this issue below.

Halfway through the book, I stopped counting the number of paragraphs that began 'political scientists are wrong that' or 'political scientists haven't understood that' or some other sentence criticizing political science, and, more broadly, mainstream political economy. In sum, it is fair to say the critique of contemporary political science is one of the book's main concerns.

Let me just make three comments about this critique of political science. Firstly, many of the concepts and issues he discusses are well represented in the political science literature, and the arguments he makes about them have a long and distinguished history within the discipline. For example, the first couple of chapters provide a very good discussion of the fluidity and contextual nature of ethnicity, which he claims is not well-understood by contemporary political science. I do not know the anthropological literature very well on this topic, but in political science this argument was advanced by Crawford Young (1976) and Nelson Kasfir (1971) several decades ago. More recently, the constructivist bent in political science has resulted in a renewed interest in cultural identities and a plethora of new work (for instance, Posner 2004; Laitin 1986). All of these scholars are fully paid-up members of the political science academy. Perhaps Chabal views this work as flawed, but it is simply not the case that the discipline has ignored this view of ethnicity.

Chabal makes a similarly curious critique when he advances the argument that these societies are communitarian. Chabal refers (albeit inexplicitly) to what I understand as the 'economy of affection' – that, in other words, these are pre or non-capitalist societies. This is an argument that I do not agree with but it is a very common argument in political science. Goran Hyden (1980) coined

the term work 'economy of affection' nearly thirty years ago, and I've always thought of this as a political science concept so I was surprised that Chabal views it as something foreign to political science. Perhaps Chabal has a specific school of thought in mind when he discusses the shortcomings of political science. For example, in places the text suggests he may be opposed to behavioural and rational choice approaches, but in the absence of more precise claims and references, it is impossible to know which particular branch(es) of the discipline or individual scholars he takes objection to.

Secondly, when it rings true, Chabal's critique of political science is better portrayed as true of *all* the social sciences, at least the dominant paradigms that first began to study Africa several decades ago. So, for example, modernization theory is criticized as a contemporary political science project. I actually think that modernization theory has its good sides and that we can still learn much from some of its main claims. But blaming political science for modernization theory seems to me a case of serious revisionist intellectual history. Surely, the worst sins of modernization theory were perpetrated not by political scientists, but by anthropologists and sociologists, from Talcott Parson to Claude Levy Strauss and Marion Levy. Indeed, the structural functionalism that temporarily infected political science in the 1960s came from these other disciplines. In sum, while I do not disagree with everything in Chabal's critique of modernization theory, a lot of it strikes me as not something specific to political science. I might add that no less than Samuel Huntington (1965) was a lot harsher about modernization theory several decades ago. This is old news.

Similarly, there is a critique of dependency theory in the book. It seems fair to say that dependency theory no longer represents an ongoing research project within mainstream political science, though, as with modernization theory, some of its propositions are well-worth keeping in mind. On the other hand, I am often reminded that dependency theory remains influential when I come to area studies meetings and interact with historians and anthropologists, for whom dependency theory and the theories emanating from dependency theory still hold a good deal of intellectual currency. Again, I agree with much of his critique of dependency theory, but this is not something I

would particularly associate with the current mainstream of the political science discipline. Here as well, the odd citation would have helped clear up who Chabal has in mind.

Thirdly, the main critique that Chabal develops about contemporary political science is that its often unsophisticated concepts do not do justice to the complexities of African social life: that its excessive focus on formal institutions and its naïve positivism and focus on quantitative data blind it to the realities of the continent. Let me make an endorsement *for* this positivism, *for* this ‘simplistic’ hypothesis testing (which I think is one of the strengths of my discipline). Hypothesis testing comes at an analytical cost: there is no doubt that the process of measurement and comparison entail simplification. It is a cost of the process of operationalizing concepts and making generalizations. On the other hand, when it is well done, the advantage is analytical clarity about the relationship between things we care about, and a better understanding of causal processes. One should not compare apples and oranges, but one is less likely to do so if one has engaged in a precise comparison of the two and determined that they are not the same fruit.

The disadvantage of the approach that Chabal is advocating is the absence of this clarity. By the end of the book, I could appreciate the complexity of social phenomena in Africa (and presumably elsewhere), but I was not sure about the causal mechanisms of the phenomena he had described. So, for example, he says several times in the book that elections simply do not matter, that political scientists are naïve to think that formal rules and elections actually matter; but then, later in the book, he writes with equal confidence that elections have changed A, B, C and D in the region. If they do not matter, why have they had this causal effect? One can get away with those kinds of contradictions when you view everything as complicated and multi-causal but if we want to make causal statements about the world, we have to simplify, we have to allow ourselves to be pinned down to a specific definition of things. Another example is economic redistribution. Chabal’s work (including his previous book *Africa Works*) suggests that because of the region’s communitarian ethos, a great deal of economic redistribution takes place which undermines capitalist accumulation.

However, there are plenty of points in the book where he describes what might be called a process of capitalist stratification, in which elites use state power to accumulate capital, of rule and government often serving the interest of elites. In fact, the evidence is beginning to appear that there is massive income inequality in Africa. As more comparative income distribution data has become available, it has become clear that African levels of inequality are as high as those prevailing in Latin America (van de Walle, 2009). This is a fascinating empirical puzzle, since both Marxian and mainstream neo-classical economic theories would predict much higher inequality in Latin America. Again, I would push Chabal to be more precise: given his assertion that large scale redistribution is central to social relations in Africa, how does he explain the unusually high levels of inequality being measured? To answer these questions in a thorough and convincing way, in a manner that would be refutable, Chabal would need to become more precise with analytical categories and empirical evidence.

One of the great challenges for African area studies is provided by the very different epistemologies and academic cultures that the different disciplines bring to the table. Most of us agree that this intellectual diversity provides much of the dynamism currently in area studies, yet it requires dialogue and exchange across a vast minefield of potential misunderstandings and disciplinary blinkers. Our disciplinary pull is very strong. Yet, I think we continue to attend interdisciplinary area studies meetings at least in part because we believe we will learn from the other disciplines, even if sometimes their concerns and jargon put us off. For instance, I hope and believe that anthropologists feel the same way about me as I do about them which is that I do not always find what they say very interesting but more often than not they challenge me and force me to question my own conceptual toolkit. Sometimes I do not understand why there are so many panels on witchcraft, for example, but the fact that smart people appear to think it is an important topic forces me at the very least to think through why I would not think it is an important topic. There is something enriching about the differences across the disciplines and it is important to retain this diversity, even if it entails some contentiousness. Indeed, as it matures African area studies is likely to become more, not less,



contentious because the disciplinary concerns are likely to continue to diverge and harden. The natural divide between the humanities and the social sciences is likely to be particularly significant, and I believe special care will need to be devoted to ensure that area studies maintains some kind of intellectual dialogue across this divide.

The bottom line is that an African studies without the mainstream political science that Chabal appears to have in mind would be intellectually the poorer, even if he was correct in his criticism of the discipline. Luckily, I do not believe he is.

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## **CHABAL'S HONOURABLE FAILURE**

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After reading the introduction, I had high hopes to find much needed new viewpoints for the study of African politics. Firstly, the title of this book is brilliant. It suggested that the book would make a break with the hegemonic stereotype of African politics in which the variety of human emotions and motivations are usually reduced to the pursuit of immediate and short-term material gain: 'Smiling' and 'suffering' appeals to a wider range of emotions than the hegemonic metaphors like 'eating' and the 'politics of the belly'. Secondly, Chabal states the primacy of empirical grounds. He claims to have only modest theoretical ambitions and wants to be judged by the insight that his 'politics from below' perspective provides. Thirdly, Chabal emphasises agency, and his stated aim is 'not to rehearse once again the fact that Africa is the 'victim' of history but to honour the day-to-day lives of those who strive to maintain human dignity in the face of overwhelming odds.' (16)

These are three laudable reasons to write a book on African politics. The question is, however, whether the book succeeds in providing a nuanced and empathic account of African politics from the inside based on empirical study that gives prime importance to Africans as actors making their own fate? Given the lofty ambition of the book, I will assess the claims Chabal makes in the light of the way I have experienced life in Africa, focusing on the recent political histories of the three countries I am most familiar with: Malawi, Zambia and Tanzania. I will assess whether the dynamics of these countries are recognisable in the 'Africa' Chabal refers to.

The most dramatic political development in the past two decades has been the return of multi-party democracy and competitive elections to these three countries. Chabal, however, is dismissive of the significance of democratic elections in Africa and is extremely pessimistic about the impact they have. A typical example of this would be his claim that: 'Elections rarely equate directly with accountability. This is the conundrum Africanist political analysts must tackle, not evade' (55). And yet the examples of Zambia and Malawi challenge such broad assertions. Zambian voters have twice sent presidents, Kaunda and Chiluba, packing when they did not want to go. In Malawi there was a powerful popular movement that prevented Muluzi to stand for a third term as president. In both countries there was a popular movement against extending the terms of office. Chiluba in Zambia and Muluzi in Malawi had no difficulty in manipulating their respective parties to gain support for a third term. However, it was much more difficult to get support from their party's representation in parliament as they had to think about their voters. Indeed, the decisive stumbling block in both cases was that they could not gain the parliamentary majority they needed to change the constitution and thereby give them a third term.

Voters can also confound simple predictions of their voting preferences, as was the case in the 2009 Malawian presidential elections. Given the fact that regional voting had been strong, it seemed a foregone conclusion that when John Tembo of the Central Region and Bakili Muluzi of the Southern Region ran together that they would win. However, the voters confounded many analysts by re-electing Bingu wa Mutharika by an overwhelming majority. One reason given for his victory was that he situated some large development projects in the areas dominated by opposition parties. Parliaments can also serve as important platforms to initiate moves against graft. In Zambia major accusations against the previous president Frederick Chiluba originated from within parliament. In Tanzania parliamentarians sent a prime minister home on corruption charges and the ensuing debate was widely followed on television.

The whole process of democratisation is belittled in Chabal's book. And, whilst perfect forms of accountability do not exist in these countries, a treatise on African politics should have room for the empirical facts mentioned here: Chabal's account of democratisation in Africa is overly pessimistic in the face of such counter-examples.

Chabal is also sceptical about the economic merits of democratisation. He claims that democratization has not led to economic gains arguing that 'Far from freeing the market for economic actors to avail themselves of liberalisation, multiparty politics has led to an ever more intense exploitation of networking for economic purposes' (141). The implication of this statement is that one-party rule is better at limiting this form of networking for economic gain whilst multiparty elections serve to exacerbate it. However, it certainly is not true that one-party politics insulates business from politics. In Zambia, for example, access to money from the mining sector after nationalisation was an essential feature of Kaunda's rule and there were strong connections between Kaunda and influential businessmen such as Andrew Sardanis – who himself was heavily involved in the nationalisation of the mines and whose business interests extended across Southern Africa. The situation in Malawi is more complicated. Kamuzu Banda realised that capitalism had to be protected against its own greed when his Press Corporation came into some problems in the early 1980s and yet access to money through economic influence was central to his rule. The role of the marketing boards as instruments to extort money from the peasantry in Tanzania under one party rule is well documented. There is, in summary, as much intense exploitation of economic life by politicians under one party rule as there is under multiparty systems.

Multipartyism has, in many cases, led to an improvement in the economic lives of ordinary Africans. The advent of multiparty elections has been accompanied almost everywhere by more freedom for farmers to sell their produce at different venues. Small business trade boomed after the democratic transitions. There was also increased foreign direct investment, albeit mostly in extractive industries, especially mining. However, a fair number of small expatriate-owned businesses emerged

as well, for example in tourism and paprika growing. There are gatekeepers charging rents in multiparty politics as well as in one party politics, but the simplistic association of multiparty politics with an increase in rent-seeking does not accurately reflect the realities of a much more complicated situation on the ground. Once more, Chabal's work would benefit from references to empirical examples to support his claims: the evidence from these examples paints an altogether more complex picture than Chabal's generalizations give credit for.

The title to Chabal's book promised a departure from hegemonic stereotypes of African politics which characterize political life on the continent as being simply motivated by individual rent-seeking and the pursuit of short-term and immediate gains by unscrupulous elites: a focus on 'suffering and smiling' suggested a move away from the dominant metaphors of 'eating' and 'the belly' towards a more nuanced approach to the everyday politics of ordinary African people. However, the simplistic model of motivation in African politics returns in Chabal's work the more one progresses through the book. For example, he argues that the logics of neo-patrimonialism continue to dominate African politics and that:

The outcome was a form of patrimonialism in which the equation between power and rent was not questioned so long as politicians agreed to redistribute their wealth to their clients... this meant that politicians became increasingly dependent on rent and that the object of power became too narrowly focused on rent-seeking, often at the exclusion of any other ambition. This has become a major a problem... politically because it means that competition between politicians reinforces the nexus of power and clientelism at the expense of other forms of accountability, which would allow greater scope for longer term policies favourable to more sustained economic development. (126)

Chabal's interpretation of neopatrimonialism is static, as it does not allow for change. Whilst Rawlings, Chiluba and Museveni can be cited as examples of rent-seeking politicians, they

have left their respective countries economically in a better state than they found it. Africa has been a site of economic growth and development in some areas; Kenya, for example, was doing economically well just before the elections, the Tanzanian economy has also fared much better in the past ten years than before. The problem, in short, is that the relentlessly negative logic contained in Chabal's analysis offers no explanation for upturns in African economies.

Furthermore, if searching for rents predominates African politics – as Chabal suggests – how can one explain why people engage in opposition politics if there are no rents to be gained from it? People join opposition parties and, indeed, people vote for them, even if they know that doing so will bring little or no rewards. People go into jail for political causes yet Chabal does not discuss such agency. This iron grip of neo-patrimonialism does not do justice to the diversity of political behaviour in Africa.

In conclusion, Chabal undertook an enterprise that has my greatest sympathy. But the book does not do justice to African politics: important empirical realities are not grasped; politics is reduced again to a very limited set of motivations; African politics is portrayed as having an iron logic that leaves no room for agency. The book simply does not live up to the aims it set out.

## **RESPONSE**

**Patrick Chabal**

I would like to express my thanks to the CAS editors for having organised this discussion of my last book. I am pleased, and not a little humbled, that eight Africanists of repute should have taken the trouble to read and write critically about *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*. There is no greater satisfaction for a scholar than getting informed and lively feedback.

I should also want to say that all eight commentators were thorough and fair. Whatever I may think of their critiques, I cannot fault them for commentaries that were both engaged and sympathetic. I am especially grateful to Sara Dorman who took the trouble to review the book in the light of my previous publications. I hope that my rejoinder will manage not just to address their critical comments but to do so in a spirit that will make possible a constructive dialogue.

Finally, I should point out that the range of the critical comments makes it impossible to address every point with the attention it deserves. In my response I will perforce focus on those issues that are relevant to broader debates. The aim of the present dialogue, as I am sure the commentators would agree, is to explore areas of analytical disagreements between us which would be fruitful for the development of a more refined study of the continent.

My response is in three parts. The first is an effort to extract what is common to the commentaries and to address these comments as part of a general explanation of what the book tried, and did not try, to do. The second is a detailed response to some of the key issues raised by the commentators. Here I take up specific critical comments, which need tackling. The last section is an attempt to move the debate forward.

Virtually all the commentators were surprised by the fact that the book is not 'empirical' and that it tackles arguments without citing individual Africanists. I admit this is unusual, particularly for an 'academic' book, and that it breaks normal conventions. So let me explain why I did as I did.

I wanted the book to be an *essay*, following a certain continental tradition: that is, primarily a discussion about ideas, concepts and approaches. This required above all a short but concentrated series of arguments. What mattered was to ask questions in what I hoped would be a fruitful fashion and suggest ways in which they might be addressed. Within this perspective, it was imperative to produce as sparse a text as possible. Whilst I concede that giving more empirical evidence would have strengthened the argument, I believe it would have run the risk of focusing attention on the validity of the account of the empirical material at the expense of the argument.

My method also meant that I decided to avoid all footnotes, except those that were mandatory. Again, this is a radical but perfectly acceptable stance. Since the nineteenth century there has been a long tradition of philosophical and social science essay writing, a form that is generally devoid of references. Inevitably, any attempt at citation would have come up short since African studies is immensely rich in interesting and relevant literature. As I found out long ago, the effort to be 'footnote fair' spared me no criticism: I was still berated for not having cited *others*, not having been thorough enough. However, I would hope that my extensive bibliography and my previous writings show that the book *was* based on a fairly extensive knowledge of the literature.

I can understand the frustration of those who wanted me to name names, but I would ask them to accept that my decision not to do so was neither a neglect of the work of colleagues nor what would have been a misplaced sense of 'superiority' on my part. Throughout the book I state explicitly that I claim no originality in research and that my writing builds on the empirical and theoretical work of other Africanists. I repeat insistently that my aim is not primarily to offer a sustained critique of other scholars but to prompt a different form of reflection. So, I do find the charge that Chabal writes as though he always 'knows best' and 'rubbishes others' slightly unfair.



I now take up some key points made in the reviews. Some reviewers said they did not recognise the Africa they knew in the book. Fair enough, but such a criticism illustrates what I was writing above: more empirical examples would have landed me in a discussion about the accuracy of my account of particular countries and a defence of the sources used. That is another exercise, which I did not attempt. My point is that the book raises questions that ought to be of relevance to the study of any sub-Saharan country. If my argument does not speak to certain country specialists, then they should not hesitate to discard it, as no doubt they will. I have no desire to impose *my* approach against *their* evidence, although I do reserve the right to dispute their interpretations in other forums (especially since other specialists of the same countries do find my writings useful).

Some of the reviews implied that the failure to identify the (Africanist or political science) scholarship that is being criticised resulted in the setting up of easily battered 'straw men'. *Yes*, if my critique of the scholarship is unfair or distorted, which I would argue it is not. But in any event, my citing the scholars would not have exonerated me from the charge since my interpretation of their work would have been the same. *No*, if (as I believe) I was referring to broad and more general shortcomings in our field, which my approach attempted to address. Whether I was fair or not is obviously a subjective call but the proof of that lies in what I offer as an alternative, which everyone is at liberty to criticise. Indeed, as I make clear, I *explicitly* set out to write the book in a way that would invite critique and make it easy to deconstruct.

I accept that some of my colleagues will not agree with my assessment of Africanist or political science scholarship but since it was my dissatisfaction with much of the interpretation offered in the field that prompted this book and *Africa Works*, I should not be faulted for pointing what I believe to be its shortcomings. Furthermore, I would remind readers that some of my earlier books did identify and debate such criticisms. *Power in Africa* is an (admittedly muted) critique of the mainstream interpretation of politics in Africa. *Culture Troubles* includes a systematic critique of the

field of comparative politics. Both of these books are heavily referenced and discuss individual approaches in some considerable detail.

The suggestion that, because the book provides a ‘political anthropology for beginners’, it might not offer new insights, is somewhat surprising. It is true that I did not have the pretension to write an ‘anthropology guide’ for political scientists. My ambition was more modest: to show how some anthropological approaches could help understand politics in contemporary Africa. Again, I cannot agree that the absence of anthropological evidence negates the relevance of the anthropological approach. And my reading of the field is that, indeed, what is called in political science the ‘qualitative’ (meaning anthropological) approach is gaining ground. The proof, as ever, will be in the value-added understanding such an approach can offer to Africanist political science scholarship. Let us wait and see.

A related critique is that the absence of empirical material weakens the claim I make to approach politics from below, or from within. Although I can understand why this comment is made, I do not accept its validity – and this for two reasons. First, my approach derives in the first place from a not inconsiderable reading of empirical anthropological material, even if it is not referenced as such, *and* from my first-hand experience since the 1970s in over a dozen African countries. There is thus no question of my having artificially ‘plucked out of the blue’ the questions I raise. Second, the emphasis in my book is on trying to look at politics in a different way, and from different angles, so my priority has been to make as clear as possible what that might involve – regardless of whether there already were actual instances of such ‘anthropological’ research in the literature.

I would give the same answer to the critique that *The Politics of Suffering and Smiling* promises, but does not deliver, on the question of a new approach in the relationship between structure and agency. The whole thrust of the book is that we need to re-consider this relationship in terms that are not readily found in the literature. It was more important for me to suggest how that might be done than to compile a list of those who have attempted it. Would the argument be stronger

if I said that I was stimulated in my reflection by M. de Bruijn *et al* (eds.), *Strength beyond Structure* (2007), a book I read but (foolishly!) contrived to omit from the bibliography? If yes, then I plead guilty. But the question remains: how best to conceptualise agency in Africa? And here I contend that my approach should help move the debate forward.

Furthermore, and this is not a small point, it has been pointed out that *The Politics of Suffering and Smiling* has a lot on suffering and nothing on smiling, turning it into a ‘misery memoir’. I explained in the introduction to this dossier why I did not manage to write the chapter on the ‘Politics of Smiling’ that belonged there. I accept some of the points made by Murray Last. Indeed, irony would have been a very good theme. However, I reject entirely the charge of ‘misery memoir’ (as I do that of ‘Afropessimist’), given that by any reasonable reckoning the lives of Africans today are measurably worse than they should be, some forty years after independence – and measurably worse because of politics, not some act of God, as Amyarta Sen compels us to accept (Sen 1999). By all means, let us praise fortitude but let us not mistake that for ‘smiling’. Black humour, for this is what it is, is neither joy nor contentment. And Fela Kuti, who inspired the title of the book, was an angry man, singing suffering rather than smiling. In the song, ‘shmling’ refers to the promises made by all religions to a better *afterlife*, not to the humour of *this* life.

The suggestion that the lack of comparative examples outside Africa reduces the book’s impact on the broader social science debate demands an answer. First, I make clear that my approach is specifically designed with a comparative brief in mind in that the topics chosen are relevant, if to varying degree, to any part of the world, including the West. They are resolutely *not* Afrocentric. Surely a chapter on ‘being’ is less Africa-obsessed than one on ethnicity or ‘tribal’ violence. Second, the attempt to adapt theory to context is also particularly well suited to a comparison of how politics is played out in Africa and elsewhere. For example, a flexible approach to clientelism would make it more, rather than less, easy to see how Africa may resemble, or differ from, South Asia.

It is my view, and a view that some of the reviewers obviously disagree with, that the type of comparative theoretical frameworks most readily used in political science – take the example of corruption – obscure more than they reveal. As Olivier de Sardan's work shows clearly, it is simply not useful to approach this question from a formal or normative perspective (Olivier de Sardan 1999). The most revealing work on corruption is that which manages to explain, in language amenable to comparison, how the relationship between power and money is handled, and abused, in particular settings. From this viewpoint, I would argue that my discussion of reciprocity and rent, for instance, is entirely relevant to the comparative understanding of corruption. I do not claim I have provided any new insight into corruption since that was not my aim. I merely argue that an approach such as the one I advocate, if used to investigate a specific setting, is more likely to produce added knowledge than, for example, Michael Johnston's approach in *Syndromes of Corruption: Wealth, Power and Democracy* (2005) – an otherwise very instructive book.

Finally, some of the reviewers pointed to weaknesses in interpretation – for example on the question of African middle classes or the consequences of neo-patrimonialism. These are important issues, which I cannot address in sufficient depth here.

It is indeed my contention that the absence of development in Africa is in no small part due to the absence of sufficiently large, strong and self-standing middle classes with meaningful economic autonomy and political clout. This is not to say that there are no middle class Africans, with revenues and a way of life that compare with their peers elsewhere in the world. It is simply to point out that such middle class individuals as there may be are not able, or not willing, to bring about a systemic change in the way in which power is exercised. The reason is simple: there is not in Africa sufficient economic development to allow for the rise and consolidation over time of middle classes as happened in, for instance, Malaysia or South Korea. So, in my view it is not helpful to equate middle classes everywhere (for reasons of money and lifestyle, among others) in an artificial attempt to engineer a comparison between Africa and, say, East Asia.

To conclude this second section let me state again that the analysis of neo-patrimonialism found in *Africa Works* and *The Politics of Suffering and Smiling* does not, and never did, imply that such a dispensation ensures proper redistribution. Quite the contrary. As I have made clear in *all* my recent writings, the long-term consequence of neo-patrimonialism is both the absence of development and the impoverishment of ever larger numbers of Africans.

In terms of moving the debate forward, the commentaries suggest to me four areas that ought to be of concern to all those who study Africa: the question of epistemology; the nature of evidence; the merit of interdisciplinary work; and the issue of ‘academic’ writing.

*The question of epistemology.* Here, it seems to me, there is still reluctance to think outside the box. Not only do disciplinary boundaries matter greatly – sometimes only as a defence of a particular subject area – but the question of theorising remains very troublesome. The objections to my enterprise range from asserting that thinking without theory is impossible (which in a narrow sense is obviously true) to the claim that my attempt to relate theory to local evidence is somewhat disingenuous, since I have my own theoretical baggage. Above and beyond the merit of my approach, I would argue that more sustained discussion on this issue is long overdue. What we mean by ‘theory’ should be explained rather than taken for granted. In a number of respects, which I hope to explore in a future volume, theory gets in the way of thinking.

*The nature of evidence.* In this area, where I gathered sustained criticism, it is obvious that there is great scepticism about a method that favours synthetic and reflective consideration outside the ‘scientific’ rules of the social sciences. It seems to me we are constrained in our appreciation of modes of explanation that are not buttressed, however artificially, by reference to a ‘representative’ sample of the field and by a ‘solid’ body of concrete data. But we should not forget that insight is not merely the result of piling up evidence. It is also the ability to re-visit the field in the face of changing

circumstances. We ought to make a space for this form of thinking and writing. Let us try to judge the relevance of an argument on its merit rather than on its evidentiary basis: social sciences are *not* hard sciences.

*The merit of interdisciplinary work.* Although in principle everyone agrees that inter-disciplinarity is a good thing, in reality we all too often tend to exhibit corporate reflexes, in defence of *our* subject. I am certainly in favour of strict disciplinary training as the basis for academic work, but I think we need not be rigid when we work. Just as we all need the experience of having done a Ph.D. in the ‘proper’ way, we need to root our work in one particular social/human science. But once we have acquired the necessary foundations, we should be guided by the research we do and the material with which we work – not by our disciplinary ‘obligations’. Again, we should try to think outside the box. Academic disciplines should be seen primarily as *tools* in our search for understanding.

*The issue of ‘academic’ writing.* Finally, I would plead for an acceptance of a wider range of writing in academia. I know we need to write for our peers because we are at the mercy of their judgement, but let that not be a prison. We also have a duty to communicate as best we can with the wider public. As is clear from the book, I particularly value the essay genre, but it does not mean I would want it to be the sole form of expression. For all that, it seems to me that at the beginning of the twenty-first century we have narrowed our options needlessly because of the ever greater ‘professionalisation’ of our disciplines. Looking back, it is clear that some of the most important work done by our academic predecessors did not follow rigidly prescribed formats. I believe we would all benefit from a more diverse range of written expression – including memoirs or fiction – in our quest to understand ourselves and others better.

## **References**

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