
Liberal democracy is fast becoming a piety in Africa, thanks to the machines of U.S. democracy promotion. To be more precise, it is the most attenuated and minimalist protective versions, conceptualized by hard-nosed liberals like Bentham, Locke, and James Mill which is promoted in Africa under the neo-liberal development orthodoxy. Paradoxically, the more humanist (if even also problematic) developmental model, theorized by John Stuart Mill is what is practiced by the core capitalist countries under the welfare state system. For this reason, a famous theorist of liberal democracy, Robert Dahl argued that democracy is incompatible with pure free market, in its utilitarian rendition as advocated by the likes of Hayek, Friedman and Nozick. As such, he argues that the Western democracies have “rejected a strictly free market economy in favor of “mixed economies” (Dahl, 1993). Thus, the promotion of protective liberal democracy as something hegemonic in Africa (in Gramscian terms) disguises a myriad of anti-democratic practices and undemocratic real life experiences of Africans, which need to be exposed. The anthology of Professor Lumumba-Kasongo is an attempt in this direction. Liberal Democracy and its Critics in Africa makes a bold attempt to depict the fallacies immanent in the apotheosis of elections as the litmus test of democracy in Africa, an inclination that Guillermo O’Donnell, one of the authors of the seminal work on transitology, warned against. More significantly, it attempts to re-cast the discourse on democratization in Africa from its one-sided, ahistoricist, and caricatural neo-liberal nostrums onto its proper socio-historical African context. In addition, it does a good job of bringing to light the original and real goals of the “second liberation” struggle by the poor and oppressed Africans; namely, a struggle for popular democracy and socio-economic well-being.

The essays in the book are revised versions of research papers written by participants and resource persons of the Governance Institute 2001, a course organized by the Council of Development for Social Research in Africa (CODESRIA), on the topic, “Democracy and Democratic Process in Africa”. The central thrust of the book is a critique of the theory and praxis of liberal democracy in Africa as the starting point to formulating a socially progressive and popular democratic model as its alternative. The interpretive framework of the book as specified by the editor is a ‘critique [of] liberal democracy from historical-structural perspective, focusing on why a social phenomenon behaves and reproduces itself the way it does’ (p. 2). Unfortunately, he did not flesh out his interpretive framework, leaving the reader wondering what this “historical structural perspective” is. Is he talking about Braudel’s “historical structures” in his famous “longue durée” epistemology? Considering the Marxist approach that the editor adopted, one would presume that he had in mind “historical materialism”. If that is the case, he needed to problematise it, considering the economistic, mechanistic and deterministic rendition of this approach by some Marxists.

Theoretically and historically, Lumumba-Kasongo rightly links liberal democracy to capitalism and class exploitation, pointing out its imperialist undercurrents when it “traveled” to Africa. Against this background, Lumumba-Kasongo then launched a critique of liberal democracy, depicting the follies of the mainstream transitology literature which uncritically promote liberal democracy, paying little or no attention to differences in the socio-historical specificities between Africa and Western liberal democracies. Drawing on Claude Ake, Lumumba-Kasongo advocates an African alternative to liberal democracy,
what he referred variously to as “developmental democracy”, “developmental state” and “consociationalism”. Again, Lumumba-Kasongo did not systematically conceptualize and map out the ingredients of these alternative models. To me, this was a serious oversight because he needed to do so before he could offer them as alternatives to liberal democracy; and more so, the fact that these concepts are not unproblematic and may actually have liberal undertones.

With these conceptual instruments laid out by the editor, the empirical referents of the book (Algeria, Cameroon, Kenya, Congo-Brazzaville, Ghana, Nigeria, and Central African Republic) were presented by the individual contributors in seven chapters in this order. The common thread of these case studies (though tampered in some cases) is that liberal democracy, animated primarily by periodic elections, is plagued with so many shortfalls that it is emptied of even its limited procedural qualities in Africa. Therefore, a major drag on democratization in Africa is the ethicized nature of party politics and elections, making democracy a likely intoxicating brew of civil conflict, rather than Rawl’s “overlapping consensus”. Other shortfalls are the lack of civilian control of the military and its involvement in elections, and motley of election fraud which make elected governments a pale version of the choice of the people – what Alade Fawole felicitously captured as “voting without choosing”.

However, as expected of edited volumes, the individual contributors varied in their consistency with the theoretical framework set by the editor, with some of the cases sharply at odds with the central thrust of the book. For example, the contributions of Rachid Tlemčani, Beatrice Onsarigo, Alade Fawole, Joachim Emmanuel Goma-Thethet, and Aime Samuel Saba, though, with different theoretical perspectives, seem to hang together with Lumumba-Kasongo’s theoretical framework and political agenda. In contrast, the chapters by Joseph-Marie Zambo Belinga and Emmanuel Debrah on Cameroon and Ghana respectively, depart from a critique of liberal democracy to actually affirm the postulation of its promoters in Africa: African voters are rational subjects, thus, ethnic identity and money do not necessarily influence the outcome of elections in Africa. For instance, Debrah argues that “citizens are rational beings who frequently make informed choices and cannot be manipulated” (p. 132). Hence, the opposition NPP party won the 2000 landmark elections in Ghana despite “the intimidation, patronage and exploitation of ethnicity and incumbency by the NDC” because, “the electorate disregarded all its manipulative strategies and voted to reject the party” (p. 143). On his part, Zambo Belinga, advocating eclectic theory approach to understanding voter’s attitude, but emphasizing the value in deploying the rational choice theory to study voters’ attitude in Africa, challenges the conventional wisdom on Africa that voters are influenced by primordial ethnic sentiments. His study of the attitudes of voters in Cameroon revealed the “versatility of Cameroonian voters”, arguing that “motivation, influences and experiences other than ones that are ethnic identity-based are at work when voters cast their ballots during election in Cameroon” (p. 61).

The value of this book is more than its contribution to the critical literature on liberal democracy in Africa. What is even more outstanding about it is the insightful and penetrating empirical analysis of the case studies, which span the sub-regional divide of the continent, departing from the practice of most critics of liberal democracy who often stop at the theoretical plane. For example, the decisive role that the military plays in installing so-called “elected” governments in Africa, as illustrated by Rachid Tlemčani’s piece on ‘the police state’ in Algeria is particularly revealing. According to him, the charge that “the army