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The Africanist’s ‘New’ Clothes

Introduction

Perhaps nowhere has the loss of the many intellectual positions attendant upon the global rout of the Left been more evident than in attempts to understand the political catastrophes and human tragedies that have beset Africans. Despite insights into instances such as Rwanda, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), there is no convincing explanation for the African débâcle in general.

A much-discussed *Economist* article rhetorically entitled ‘Hopeless Africa?’ typifies the views of the ‘informed’ press. This and like commentaries provide no framework within which Africa’s woes become intelligible as anything more than an atavism generated by innate African barbarism, the machinations of corrupt dictatorial rulers, the incompetent misguided policies of the UN, or – for the nostalgic – the machinations of Western imperialism.\(^2\)

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In academia, the hegemonic explanation is that African states lack the capacity for ‘governance’; that African states lack transparency in their operation, accountability in the formulation and results of their policies, and predictable regularity in their day-to-day workings. These deficiencies are understood to result from the prevalence of ‘neo-patrimonialism’, forms of state rule are personalised and thus subject to the whims and caprices of rulers who stay in power by dispensing punishments and favours in ways opaque, unaccountable, and unpredictable to both their own peoples, self-styled benefactors and would-be investors.

One of the more influential variants of patrimonialist thought is ‘prebendalism’. Prebends, in Weber’s analysis of the transition to the modern state, were offices gifted to an inferior in feudal Europe that carried with them fixed rent payments for life arising out of some fixed resource such as land in compensation for real or notional duties. In recent theory, Weber’s analytical tool has been superimposed willy-nilly on present-day African reality because ‘the peculiar political economic conditions of the post-colonial world have contributed to the entrenchment of a form of state organisation, and of attitudes regarding the uses of state office, which are pre-modern’. Here, ‘instead of the constitutional and legal systems, as well as the stated impersonal norms, determining the form of this state organisation, such legal rational features largely serve to camouflage extensive prebendal practices’. Significantly, an idea set out to theorise the birth of the modern state in Western Europe becomes one which, when applied to present-day Africa, assumes the very existence of what – the state – it was originally intended to explain. Also interesting is how such a culturalist explanation comes to supplant both political economy and history, and find profound resonance within debates about Africa today.

This and like ‘theories’ of the state have filled the space vacated by the Left.

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3 Grindle 1996, pp. 31–8. See Abrahamsen 2000 for a critique of governance’s discourse pretension, consonance with minimal procedural democracy and the regulatory and extractive aims of adjustment.


5 See Richard Joseph 1991, pp. 55–68. In the postwar and early postcolonial decades, Weber inspired and spawned the modernisation and comparative development literature on the political-cultural dimension of politics and development, of patron-clients, of ‘prismatic’ and ‘bazaar’ societies, which Joseph’s account, like much of the recent literature, is both an amendment of and a re-turn to. See Weber 1970 [1948], pp. 198–210, 295ff.

6 Despite, that is, recent valiant updated African Weberian attempts to resuscitate them. See, for example, Samatar and Samatar 2002.