Africa and International Relations: 
Regional Lessons for a Global Discourse

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ABSTRACT. Case studies, theories, and examples from Africa are exceedingly rare in international relations. Indeed, examples from Africa are, at best, valued for their nuisance potential. This article argues that the study of international relations is limited by this interpretation of Africa, and by a larger ignorance of African contributions. Key debates on the African continent surrounding the central concepts of mainstream international relations, including the state, power, and self-determination, are interrogated with a view to expanding their use in contemporary international relations. The examples of apartheid South Africa, the African debate on political economy and development, and African perspectives on questions raised by the liberal paradigm, are used to illustrate the importance of the region to the more global discourses. In examining the important contribution of African scholarship to debates central to international relations, this article highlights the necessity for engaging African scholars in the broader discourses of international relations.

Keywords: Africa • Political economy • Apartheid International relations

Introduction

International relations (IR) involves the study of power between and among states. The concept of power is one open to dispute, and typically theorists have argued over definitional aspects as well as empirical applications. This article uses power as a starting-point of analysis, but examines both the power of the discipline of international relations, and power dynamics within the discipline. As posed by Kate Manzo, “Just how independent of imperial relations of power is the knowledge produced by modern academic disciplines?” (Manzo, 1999). When power is viewed from this perspective, contestation moves away from states and
into the realm of what is studied and why. The African continent typically is ignored in mainstream IR studies. Phrases such as “off the radar,” “Afropessimism,” and “collapsed states” have come to depict the relationship of the African continent to international relations. Is this because Africa has little to contribute to IR, or because the power dynamics of the discipline are such that African voices are not heard? The aim of this article is to outline the contribution of African scholarship to the study of IR, and to highlight the notion that power dynamics within the discipline affects what is studied and why (ibid.).

The field of IR is in crisis. Michael Brecher argues that “the clash of paradigms in International Studies has generated more heat than light for a field in distress” (Brecher, 1999). Indeed, in the new millennium, the paradigmatic debate must of necessity shift from what Brecher describes as “intellectual intolerance,” to a more nuanced and global understanding of relations between and among states and their citizens. Typically understood as the “canon” of IR, realism, neorealism, liberalism, and to a lesser extent critical theory as derived from Marxism, are all Western constructs. As Bobrow notes, “for better or worse, Anglo-American scholars ... have loomed very large in the development of international relations as a field” (Bobrow, 1999). Denemark agrees and goes further, noting that Eurocentric approaches define the normative content of what is studied, and why (Denemark, 1999). The globe is laden with hierarchies, stated and unstated, and it is crucial as a starting-point to be clear about the values we place on one form of inquiry as opposed to another. In this hierarchy of values, mainstream scholars of IR have tended to place at the periphery the study and utility of Africa as a region. Despite their paradigmatic differences, the “canon” of international relations has been consistent in its dismissal of Africa. I argue that this is to the detriment of IR.

For the IR scholar, the significance of Africa lies solely in its disruptive potential for neat theoretical paradigms. This article offers the suggestion, on the contrary, that African examples and African scholarship lend important insights and critiques to the various perspectives on international relations (Sindjoun, 1998; Zeleza, 1997; Grovogui, 1998; Nyango’oro, 1999). From the lessons of colonialism to the problems of resistance as represented in contemporary debates on the continent, Africa is a relatively underexplored region with respect to theory-building, and yet offers a powerful understanding of the functioning of states and markets, as well as the potential for their failure.

This article first discusses some of the postcolonial debates parallel to the development of IR as a field in Western scholarship. Second, it examines the main assumptions and propositions of liberalism, as well as an understanding of the scope of its applicability in international relations and in Africa as advocated by its proponents. Third, it acknowledges African perspectives on international relations, and in particular on liberalism, and discusses some of the important critiques offered by scholars of Africa. The article concludes with observations about the contribution of Africa to an interrogation of the various assumptions of international relations.

**Colonialism, Apartheid, and Framing the Debate**

A fact that is rarely mentioned in the literature is that colonialism and imperialism in Africa existed parallel to the development of the canon of IR. Following the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, African colonies were formed as territories of European conquest and settlement. The colonial state, therefore, was very much a
creation of European history in Africa; a fact not lost upon many Africans, particularly throughout the wars of resistance against settler colonialism. From this history of violence and imposition, especially in the period following the Second World War, emerged a variety of responses whose significance to the study of international relations would become evident only decades later. In 1945 when the United Nations organization (UN) was formed, only four countries in Africa were member-states, including the Republic of South Africa. At present there are 53 UN member-states from Africa, the majority of which gained their independence during the 1960s. In 1948, the same year the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed, the National Party came to power in South Africa on a platform of the protection of white privilege, which transformed into the notorious apartheid policy of separate development and group disenfranchisement of the African population (Black, 1999). The Republic of South Africa was one of the four African founder member-states of the UN, and its legendary policies of racial discrimination and apartheid make it an interesting and ironic study in international relations.

The response of African scholars and politicians to these anomalies was to embrace pan-Africanism. As Mkandawire notes, African nationalism in its expression was both inward and outward looking, or both national and continental (Mkandawire, 1999: 32–37). This was in essence the nature of pan-Africanism. A pan-Africanist ethos enveloped the relations between and among African states as they gained independence and formed the Organization of African Unity (OAU) on 25 May 1963. In order to understand Africa’s international relations, it is instructive to look at the Charter of the OAU (Clapham, 1996: 108–111; OAU, 1992). Of the seven principles guiding the organization, it is instructive that a commitment to the total liberation of the African continent looms large. The growing numbers of independent African states (as well as Latin American and Asian states) in the 1960s enabled them to use the principles and established forums of international relations and global discourse to advance the cause of sovereignty and self-determination for Africans. The student, ever attentive, now became the teacher.

In 1963 the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination was passed in the UN General Assembly, and came into force in 1969. The Africa Group guided the General Assembly in Resolution 2202A(XXI) in declaring apartheid a crime against humanity. This was expanded in 1969 when the General Assembly recognized the South African struggle as one of self-determination and majority rule, as well as a struggle for human rights and fundamental freedoms (Resolution 2506, 21 November 1969). In effect this was self-determination turned on its head, and used by African countries to assert their right to independence. At the OAU, during the same year, the Lusaka Manifesto was signed, committing the regional body to ending white minority rule on the continent.

During the 1960s and 1970s there were several attempts by the African Group to spearhead the imposition of mandatory sanctions against South Africa through the UN Security Council (Klotz, 1996), attempts periodically thwarted by the triple veto of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. In 1974, following the adoption of the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid (Resolution 3068 [XXVIII] of 30 November 1973), South Africa was suspended from the General Assembly.

South Africa throughout the 1970s systematically used the threat or application
of force, as well as economic sanctions, as policy instruments in the Southern African region. This model of aggression, encompassing both military and economic measures, was first elaborated by the then South African Prime Minister Johannes Vorster, who in 1975 proposed the establishment of a Constellation of African States. P.W. Botha, who took over from Vorster in 1978, expanded upon the security problematic in the sub-region by proposing in 1977, while still defense minister, the policy of “total strategy.”

The concept of “total strategy” was based on South Africa’s claim of a “right to intervene” in any African state south of the equator. This, of course, was part of apartheid South Africa’s flagrant violation of, and refusal to comply with, both treaties and norms of international law. Between 1975 and 1985 the allocations for defense rose dramatically, from 692 million rands to 4.27 billion rands, with military incursions into and destabilization of South Africa’s neighboring states, including Lesotho, Mozambique, Angola, Botswana, and Zimbabwe also increasing.

As a political response to both apartheid South Africa and colonial rule in southern Africa, the Frontline States were born in 1974, spearheaded by Tanzania and Zambia, but also consisting of Congo-Brazzaville, Zaire (Kinshasa), and Botswana. The 1975 fall of the Portuguese colonial regime drastically altered the regional balance of forces, with Angola and Mozambique included as key members of the Frontline States. This also led to the withdrawal of Zaire and Congo-Brazzaville from the Frontline States grouping, and an increased effort by South Africa to block the efforts of the sub-region to free itself from political and economic dominance. The independence of Zimbabwe in 1980, of Namibia in 1990, and the democratic election of a South African government in 1994, finally altered this regional balance, and led to the disbanding of the OAU liberation committee.

Centrality of the Development Debate in African International Relations

The significance of political independence on the African continent has historically defined many aspects of post-colonial and post-apartheid relations. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, in a famous paraphrase said, “Seek ye the political kingdom, and all other things shall follow.” Questions of poverty, development, and underdevelopment have always been central in the debates concerning international relations, more specifically international political economy in Africa. Is political control central to African governments’ ability to tackle issues of poverty? From the point of view of many African scholars, the answer has been “yes,” and this in turn has posed a number of interesting questions. Many of these questions interrogate the definition of independence in its broadest sense, and examine the concept of neo-colonialism. The African debate has been best exemplified by the question of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), as advocated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and whether Africa has reached a “post-adjustment” period.

One of the most problematic aspects of the position of Western IR theorists from the point of view of a variety of African scholars is with regard to the marriage of the propagation of democracy to foreign economic and political penetration. The debate on structural adjustment in Africa has outlined this concern most clearly.

The advocates of liberal market reform in Africa have faced a sustained
challenge by Africans on the implications of allowing an unfettered "market mechanism" to operate in highly dependent and vulnerable economies (Olukoshi, 1999). The sphere of economics throughout the 1980s and 1990s has been characterized by both enforced constraint and market failure, which has led to the movement towards a post-adjustment discourse in Africa and in the international financial institutions.

The current transnational neoliberal economic offensive to open African markets seeks to claim, in the face of strong internal opposition, that Africa is being prepared for democracy. Are African countries, then, being designated as choiceless democracies? (Mkandawire, 1999). In other words, who are the agents of market reform, and to whom are they responsible? The hostility with which international financial institutions have approached the question of state intervention in Africa has been the subject of much discussion, particularly with respect to the economic, social, and political effects of structural adjustment on the continent.

Fukuyama makes an unambiguous argument that modernization theory failed in the 1970s due to attacks from those he terms "generic postmodernists," or dependency theorists (Fukuyama, 1989). He further states that its resurgence is a welcome development. In the liberal position, there is an assumed compatibility between democracy and capitalism in much of the literature; this assumption underlying liberal thought has been challenged by African theorists and economists at a variety of levels.

The centrality of this economic argument has been challenged from a pragmatic perspective, after over two decades of liberal market reform throughout much of Africa. As Claude Ake notes, since the 1970s there have been some parts of Africa that have declined so decisively due to market reforms that they have established once and for all the notion of the reversibility of development (Ake, 1995). Samir Amin has further argued that liberalization on the continent merely reinforces unequal development in Africa (Amin, 1996).

The belief in a mythical market that will alleviate the African economic condition, therefore, is open to empirical contestation. There is no firm consensus on the effects of liberal market reforms in Africa, but a powerful and growing African perspective argues that these reforms have not only failed to improve the African condition, they have actually worsened it. The importance of this perspective as a criticism of the liberal paradigm cannot be overstated, because if true the liberal assumption in international relations of open markets offering opportunities for mutual gain will of necessity be open to question.

**African Perspectives on Liberalism in International Relations**

The liberal tradition in international relations looks to individual rights and individual welfare as the normative basis for international institutions and global exchange (Keohane, 1990). Although much of liberalism is drawn from the realm of economics, the political realm is increasingly represented as fundamental to its ethos. As a European theoretical tradition, the history of liberalism and the examples from which it draws are located largely in the West.

Michael Doyle, in his description of liberal regimes, notes four definitional characteristics. These are the presence of private market-based economies, the existence of external sovereignty, a citizenry with juridical rights, and republican representative governments (Doyle, 1995). In the field of international relations,
liberalism occupies a central explanatory space in outlining how peaceful competition and peaceful common marketization can lead to all round peace. Liberals also make the argument that the democratic ethos can be used to explain the limits or absence of war, particularly in the post-cold-war period. Liberalism makes a powerful argument concerning the necessity for an open exchange of goods and services. This exchange, liberals argue, along with international rules and institutions, leads to the promotion of both international peace and economic prosperity.

In 1989 Francis Fukuyama published “The End of History?”, in which he argued that Western economic and political liberalism had triumphed over any viable systemic alternatives (Fukuyama, 1989). In this piece and later works, Fukuyama draws from Hegelian thought, which traces the evolution of self-awareness and self-esteem to the point of perfection, and which Fukuyama argues has been achieved in the modern liberal democratic society. Fukuyama contends that political democratization and consumer capitalism have resolved the main contradictions over which, throughout history, human beings have been prepared to fight. With the fall of the communist bloc, he further argues, all rival forms of political identity have been eliminated in the sense that they have failed to satisfy either the desire for wealth or the desire for freedom. Have we not then, Fukuyama asks, reached the end of history?

Fukuyama’s argument has important implications for international relations theory. First, it implies that peace will be accessible to all nation-states willing to undertake liberal democratic reform. Indeed, this civil peace brought about by liberalism, he argues, should logically have its counterpart in relations among nation-states. The “theory” of a democratic peace has been the outgrowth of this proposition, positing that democracies rarely if ever fight each other, tending instead to fight undemocratic or illiberal regimes.

The liberal perspective in international relations does not take Africa seriously. African examples and perspectives are regarded as primarily of nuisance value. In his “Second Thoughts,” Fukuyama states, “…and sub-Saharan Africa has so many problems that its lack of political and economic development seems overdetermined” (Fukuyama, 1999:19).

Bernard Magubane reminds us that much of the historical literature that has influenced Western thought, and in particular liberal thought, displays an uncritical ignorance of Africa. For example, Hegel in the Introduction to the Philosophy of History states,

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\text{At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the world, it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movement in it—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European world.... What we properly understand by Africa is the unhistorical, Underdeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here as on the childhood of the world's history.... The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of history, Asia the beginning (quoted in Magubane, 1999: 25 [my emphasis added]).}
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This disregard for Africa and African contributions in much of the liberal tradition is, in my view, unfortunate. The assumption is made by many liberal theorists that Africa has little to contribute with respect to either liberal democracy or consumer capitalism. The ignorance ingrained in this assumption exposes
liberalism not only to a vast array of critiques, particularly from African scholars, but leaves the theory untested in a variety of important circumstances. The African critique, direct or indirect, of liberalism in international relations enhances the breadth and depth of our theoretical and operational understanding, and offers an important contribution to our interpretation of how nation-states relate. The following sub-sections examine a number of these critiques.

**Whose Rights?**

There have been a variety of important contributions from African scholars with respect to the question of "rights," a centerpiece of the liberal doctrine. The recent history of European colonialism of the African continent offers a regime of rights from which the colonized were excluded (Mamdani, 1999). The fundamental rights and freedoms advocated by liberal theorists were applied historically in a racialized and exclusive manner in the African context, with liberalism virtually silent on this selective application.

Mamdani further argues that after independence,

...the defense of racial privilege could no longer be made in the language of racism. Confronted by a deracialized state, racism not only receded into civil society but also defended itself in the language of individual rights and institutional autonomy. To the indigenous ears, the vocabulary of rights rang hollow, a lullaby for perpetuating racial privilege (Mamdani, 1999: 193).

Therefore the question of racialized privilege is not only an historical question eliminated by decolonization; it is a contemporary problem, which liberalism does not address conceptually. This is precisely because it is the same discourse and language of rights that is used to protect (usually racialized) privilege. In Mamdani's view, this has led to a separation of the discourse of rights from the discourse of justice in the post-colonial African context.

The question of historically accumulated privilege is an important question for the liberal discourse, because it asks, "Whose rights?" The post-apartheid context in South Africa is interesting in this regard, because the definition of apartheid goes to the heart of the debate over remedies. If apartheid is understood, as the liberal discourse would have us believe, as the denial of individual civil rights, then the restoration of these rights through the legislative elimination of discrimination would point towards a remedy. If, on the other hand, apartheid is understood as a denial of collective socio-economic and political justice, then a remedy would of necessity need to examine the redress of these collective legacies. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), in Mamdani's view for example, identified the individual *perpetrators* of apartheid abuse, but failed to identify the collective *beneficiaries* of apartheid, which may be a more important question.

**Interpretations of Democracy**

Fukuyama in his definition of democracy outlines an extremely formulaic construction, which defines democratic regimes as those that grant their people the right to choose their government through periodic, secret-ballot, multiparty elections on the basis of universal and equal adult suffrage (Fukuyama, 1989). This narrow definition would include the vast majority of African countries in the present day.
African scholars have led a debate on the substance of democracy that deepens the liberal construct in meaningful and useful ways. This debate has been cast in the framework of liberal versus popular or radical democracy (Saul, 1997). There has been an obvious need, identified primarily by African scholars, to expand the democratic space and to discuss democratic attributes in relation to social agents. Indeed, liberal democracy in the African context has tended to be very illiberal, and there has been recognition that the defense of democratic rights cannot be reduced to the question of electoral politics alone.

As Richard Saunders argues in the case of Zimbabwe, the liberal democratic construct outlines a pro forma democracy that evokes little popular enthusiasm and diminishes the active participation of ordinary Zimbabweans (Saunders, 1995). Claude Ake concurs with this viewpoint in arguing the Nigerian case, and notes that liberal democracy often repudiates popular power. In this case democracy then becomes a condition of power (Ake, 1995).

The definition of democracy is more than just a conceptual question. There are very real-world policy implications and consequences pertaining to the export of the “democratic model” to countries throughout the globe, and therefore an interrogation of the substance and meaning of democracy becomes crucial. The devil indeed is in the details, and a continuing debate on the African continent regarding this democratic substance is an important contribution and critique of the liberal paradigm.

**Challenging the Democratic Peace**

Liberalism claims to explain the systemic outcomes of inter-state actions. The assumption that systemic predictions can follow from domestic theories of preferences is highlighted in much of the literature on the “democratic peace.” The logic of the new world order, under the theory of a democratic peace, argues that there is a tendency for liberal regimes not to fight each other, as well as a tendency for liberal regimes to fight non-liberal regimes. This construct has come to define the liberal promise of international peace and cooperation through the promotion of democracy and democratic institutions.

Africa is rarely mentioned in the debate over whether democracies fight each other, because it is asserted that there are no democracies in Africa. As already mentioned, not only is this untrue, but the entire notion of democracy is open to disputation. Although the theory of a democratic peace has been criticized on the grounds that both historically and in the present day this debate is very selective in the way its proponents use to argue their cases, this criticism is not exclusive to Africa.

The spread of liberal democracy and consumer capitalism has not resolved many of the contradictions in Africa, but has rather in many cases exacerbated internal sociopolitical struggles, externalized in a variety of forms. The logic of the new world order necessarily disenfranchises the poorest regions, and this has led to an increasing income distribution gap. On the African continent, the prospects for peace, arguably, have less to do with democracy in its liberal sense, and more to do with questions of socio-economic distribution, or a deepened understanding of the democratic question.

The promise of peace to countries that undertake liberal institutional reform has proven elusive on the African continent. The litmus test for democratic peace theory is its ability to define its variables in a comprehensive format, as opposed to
dismissing African countries as anomalies. In this sense the relationship between political and economic reforms, as well as issues of distribution, must of necessity be taken into account.

A proper understanding of the historical nature of the state in Africa is key in this regard. Liberal scholars have here made a concession, in acknowledging that liberalism can have imperial consequences or can lead to imperial pursuits. As Keohane puts it, normatively liberalism is "distressingly plastic," and accommodates too easily to dominant interests seeking to use its institutional skills to improve the situation rather than fundamentally to restructure them (Keohane, 1990: 192). This normative orientation of liberalism is significant in the sense that the democratic ethos is a conservative project, and has had contentious consequences, from "civilizing missions" to the promotion of "good governance."

From an historical perspective, it is crucial to understand that African nations and peoples have pursued violent conflict over a variety of fundamental principles, with the territorial state as not the only strategic representative body. Whereas Doyle makes the argument that democracies have forms of institutional constraints, he avoids a crucial question in Africa, where a variety of economic weaknesses have tended to feed other weaknesses in the sociopolitical sphere (Doyle, 1995). Democracy, then, is not necessarily the primary factor that prevents war in African international relations; indeed, it can actively promote war.

Understanding the State

The state is one of the most enduring concepts in international relations, whether realists or liberals are discussing it. In what Olukoshi terms the "era of 'basket case' thesis of Africa" (Olukoshi, 1999: 452), the 1990s were instructive in terms of our approaches to the question of the state. How can we best understand the state in Africa, and how can this enhance our understanding of the state in the changing global context? Some Western scholars of IR, in their failure to interpret the evolution and fluidity of the state in Africa, have deemed it a "collapsed state" or a "failed state." Does this correspond to an empirical reality, or does this perhaps reflect the lack of creativity on the part of some Western-oriented scholars of IR?

Mamdani notes that the key problem with the concept of "collapsed states" is that "it proceeds by making analogies and in the process overlooks what is different about the state in Africa" (Mamdani, 1998). As mentioned earlier in this article, the concept of the state in Africa cannot be separated from its colonial baggage, and with this colonial baggage came the persistent question of legitimacy. If Bobrow is correct in his assertion that the state is enduring, yet changing (Bobrow, 1999: 5), then it is imperative that scholars examine the question of the state with a degree of creativity and flexibility. As noted by Ferguson and Mansbach, traditionally the central state drew its sovereignty and legitimacy from its territorial citizens (Ferguson and Mansbach, 1999: 99–100), but in an increasingly globalized world this may be changing. The state may derive its power from a variety of sources, and in the context of Africa what may appear to be a loss of central state power may in fact be its reconfiguration.

Conclusion

The relationship between power, knowledge, and IR is complex, but we do ourselves a disservice when we fail to identify the implications of these
interactions. In this piece I have argued that the production of knowledge in the context of dominant and imperial relations of power not surprisingly has led to a skewed view of African contributions to the discipline of international relations. It is further argued that the contributions of African cases, African debates, and African scholarship enhance theory-building in the field and challenge many of the assumptions held by some theorists.

Ken Booth makes the point that "whatever theoretical positions we have, and even historians cannot escape them, it is an obligation to try to be self-aware, explicit and informed" (Booth, 1996: 334). In the case of international relations, as has been demonstrated, Eurocentric assertions are too often represented as fact, an assertion used to dismiss an entire continent as irrelevant to theories that expound a universal message. As has been demonstrated with reference to South Africa, the key concepts of IR were not developed with decolonization in mind, and indeed were used in an ironic fashion to argue against colonization in Africa.

For many scholars of international relations, the relevance of Africa lies essentially in its nuisance potential. Whereas African examples and scholarship are not integrated into the mainstream of international relations' thought and critique, it is recognized that the disruptive nature of socio-economic and political crises in Africa can lead to serious consequences in terms of policy for many Western nations. This article has argued that the positive and negative lessons emanating from the African continent not only have policy consequences, but must of necessity lead to a reconsideration of certain theoretical assumptions in the various paradigms. These theoretical assumptions include the primacy of the unfettered market in guiding economic relations, the liberal democratic construct as the basis of politics, and the European model of the state. The claim of liberals that the spread of consumer capitalism can be acclaimed as an asset to peace may be true in some areas of the globe, but on the African continent it has only accentuated the bitterness of this economic dispute. Ake (1995) argues that global politics are similar to American urban centers, where violence is confined to the poorer sections. This is a significant statement, since even within nations where history supposedly has ended, the question of poverty will continue to bedevil the liberal paradigm, giving rise to new and meaningful contributions to international relations theory.

Notes
1. These four were South Africa, Egypt, Liberia, and Ethiopia.
2. The well-known attempts were in 1970 (Resolution 282) where an attempt to impose mandatory sanctions was defeated by the triple veto of the United Kingdom, the United States, and France, and on October 30, 1974 when an attempt was made to have South Africa expelled from the UN. This too was vetoed.
3. Mahmood Mamdani expressed these views in a seminar in the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cape Town, entitled, "From Reconciliation to Renaissance," 18 May 1999.

References


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