

Book Reviews

Pierre Englebert (2009), *Africa: Unity, Sovereignty, and Sorrow*, Boulder, Co. & London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, ISBN: 978-1-58826-646-0 (Hardcover) / 978-1-58826-623-1 (Paperback), 310 pp.

Pierre Englebert would like to approach African governments in the way that the managers of ailing companies often deal with employees: He would like to dismiss them *en masse* – that is, withdraw their international recognition, but then suggest that they reapply for their own jobs (246). As part of this reapplication process, in which they would compete with other applicants for sovereignty, they would have to make a convincing case that they are willing and able to represent the interests of their citizens.

This, according to Englebert, is precisely what African governments are failing to do at present – they oppress their citizens, exploit them, ignore their interests and, unlike other authoritarian regimes elsewhere in the world, they do not have a functioning economic model that could offer prosperity to their citizens as a compensation for their lack of political rights. Englebert's book opens with the categorical, albeit eventually qualified, declaration that “by and large, the states of sub-Saharan Africa are failures”. Hence it is seen as surprising that African states continue to exist, that they have not all collapsed, and that Africans do not, so to speak, “opt out” of the state. Englebert refers to this as the “secessionist deficit” and, with the help of statistics, attempts to demonstrate that there have been relatively few secessionist movements and state divisions in Africa since 1960 compared to other regions. Moreover, as he sees it, even the few separatists that exist in Africa are not real ones: Those found in Senegalese Casamance, among the Tuareg in Niger and Mali, and in South Sudan (it would appear that the referendum of 2011 could not have been predicted) are more concerned with the control of local institutions of the central state than with secession; the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) may in fact aim to achieve independence, but it only does so on the basis of existing colonial borders, thus subscribing – like all African governments since 1957 have done – to the fetish of international recognition; Ethiopia is an exception in the context of post-colonial Africa. These not-quite-real separatist movements simply benefit from a particular historical trend, as was the case in the 1990s when the rules governing the international recognition of states were temporarily relaxed (155ff.).

A famous essay written almost 30 years ago by Jackson and Rosberg (1982) asked the question “Why do Africa's weak states persist?” Their

answer was that African states are based mainly on the judicial statehood afforded to them by the international system and less on the effective internally oriented exercise of power – that is, empirical statehood. Working along the same lines, Bayart (1989) later introduced the concept of “extroverted states” and Frederick Cooper (2002) refers to “gatekeeper states”. Building on these perspectives, Englebert argues that extroversion constitutes a means of domination for African elites – it provides them with an internal legal command that is covered by international law. This, one may add, is the opposite of the principle of colonial rule, whereby colonial masters had to prove their effective command of the regions they claimed in order to achieve the recognition of their peers. Legal command enables post-colonial governments to skim off rent without the population being able to sanction them. Hence, the astonishing resilience of ineffective and corrupt – in short, weak – African states can be explained by this interest on the part of the elites in preserving their stipends and sinecures indirectly secured by the international system.

Englebert presents an impressive range of empirical facts in support of this thesis. Barotseland in Zambia, the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, the Kivu region within the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Nigeria are all dealt with in detail in the book. Particularly convincing are the ethnographic vignettes from the eastern Congo. Here, officials who have not received any salary payments for months, sometimes years, continue to go to work; checkpoints populated by a confusing number of officials (i.e. the tax authorities, representatives of the ministries for mining, foreign trade and customs, along with a body mysteriously named “Office Congolais de Contrôle”) can be found at the exits of the mines; foreigners entering the country are asked to present a visa issued by the central government despite the fact that Kivu lies largely outside the latter’s sphere of influence; and even the rebels ask the researcher for an *ordre de mission* issued by the very central government they are fighting against. It becomes very clear that Englebert got the idea for his book in this particular corner of Africa where a multitude of state agencies continue to exist despite the fact that they do not provide any identifiable services. Extrapolating from this situation, he attempts to mould the political developments of the past 50 years in more or less *all* sub-Saharan African states into his perspective. As a result, the book practically becomes a manual of African post-colonial politics, offering rapid access to information via the index to anyone seeking knowledge about a particular country. There is one surprising omission, however: Englebert does not have anything to tell us about the logic of the Biafra conflict of the 1960s, which might contradict the book’s main argument.

This attempt to measure all of Africa using the yardstick of a single historical factor is highly problematic. In this regard, Englebert's book suffers from four tendencies, the first two of which involve a dominant mode in current writing about Africa, and the third and fourth of which reflect the constraints of academic publishing, particularly in the US. Current writing about Africa is characterised, firstly, by a remarkable tendency to generalise about the entire continent, which no author specialising in Asia, for example, would dare contemplate. This usually involves the extrapolation of a single empirical situation to the entire continent. In Englebert's case, this clearly relates to his experience in the eastern Congo, which is made to serve as an example for all of sub-Saharan Africa. This tendency is associated, secondly, with an intensive search for a single factor that would explain the plight of Africa, a conceptual master key that can unlock the puzzle of the "African exception". Englebert's book is a typical example of this tendency to substitute historical explanations with a philosophy of history. He is not concerned with the identification of contingent factors which, through their myriad combinations and mutual (correlated) causal processes, have led to the emergence of the current complex situation on the African continent. Instead, he claims that the entire situation arose from a single historical moment – that of decolonisation – and evolved by necessity from this, and that this historical moment gave birth to a structure of post-coloniality, from which African states are fundamentally incapable of liberating themselves (while *non-African* post-colonies apparently *are* capable). Here, the argument becomes outright theological: The sovereignty accorded by outside actors represents the "original sin" (204) of African statehood. As a consequence, and keeping in line with this theological mode of thinking, post-colonial Africa can be saved only by others. These two tendencies are joined, thirdly, by the peculiar logic of the publishing market: Simply put, books about Zambia, Cameroon, the Congo, and Nigeria sell even less well than books with "Africa" in the title. And fourthly, the economics of academic publishing, in the US in particular, appear to dictate that bright ideas cannot assume their final form in essays but must instead be rolled out in monographs.

For Englebert, the African drama has only two main groups of actors: on the one hand, the "elites" (which he appears to conceive of as a collective actor), and on the other, the rest of the population. The concept of the elite, which is central to his line of argumentation, is nowhere defined in the book. Sometimes one gets the impression that what is intended by the term is merely a close circle of people around the president. In other places, governors, senior administrative officials and chiefs are named, and in others, again, the reader gets the feeling that this group encompasses all civil ser-

vants, right down to those of the very low-ranking orders “including clerks, advisers, assistants [and] secretaries” (63). This is a classification reminiscent of Bayart’s concept of the “rhizome state”, which has, so to speak, infiltrated society at large. What is lacking is the question as to what could constitute the social basis for the successful mobilisation of challenges to state rule in individual African states, which is what would “normally” be expected, according to Englebert. Maybe, then, the problem with many African countries is not only the inefficiency of the state and the corruption of its elites, but as Englebert himself hints at – albeit as a mere afterthought on the very last page of the book (261f.) – the absence of an at least partly autonomous capitalist middle class.

Moreover, Englebert is rather vague in his use of terms such as “sovereignty” and “failed state”. As traditionally understood, sovereignty refers to the supreme decision-making power of the state. How a ruler uses this sovereignty is a different matter. A state does not lack sovereignty just because it is not democratic, does not respect human rights and does not provide for education, health and economic development, a reproach Englebert justifiably levels at many African states. It makes little sense to classify as failed states both those whose governments have little representation outside of the capital city – for example, the Central African Republic – and repressive regimes such as Togo and Zimbabwe, whose governments are indeed quite present all over their respective countries, this being a matter of significant distress for many of their citizens. The fact that states or rebel movements that are still fighting or have come to power seek international recognition is not a specifically African phenomenon; it certainly does not justify Englebert’s ridiculing of the petition made to the United Nations by the West Cameroonian SCNC (Southern Cameroons National Council) as “a pilgrimage to God who grants sovereignty to Africans” (118). The normative bias of Englebert’s argumentation becomes clear in these passages: There are “normal” states – more or less Western European and North American ones – which have “mechanisms of accountability and institutional restraint” (5), and states that deviate from these to a greater or lesser extent, Africa as a whole providing the extreme cases thereof.

This normative bias and exoticising mode is particularly troubling when it comes to Englebert’s presentation of nationalism in Africa. While elsewhere (he does not specify precisely where), nationalism represents “a liberating affirmation of the self as member of a cultural community” (198), in Africa – and it would seem in Africa alone – it is an instrument for the control of access to state resources that promotes social polarisation and exclusion. Whereas nationalism elsewhere is inclusive, in Africa it is “solitary” and “divisive” (214, see also 204). Whereas elsewhere, nationalism grew out of

the “natural solidarity of the national community”, in Africa it is manipulated by the elites as an instrument for securing power and concealing social differences (198). Moreover, national identity in Africa has never freed itself from its colonial origins (204) as it has, presumably, in Canada, Indonesia and Australia.

Englebert tries to persuade us that Africa’s basic problem is the continent’s “exogenous” source of state sovereignty. The fact that he also argues that the solution can only come from outside – by subjecting African governments to a hard turnaround strategy like failing companies – is a highly contradictory, neo-colonial fantasy. He dilutes this proposal in the remainder of his final chapter and pleads for stringent conditionalities and for bypassing the existing African governments in the allocation of (development aid) resources. This is in order to create incentives for “benevolent rule” (250) through “effective units of governance” (252) within existing nation-states: a kind of African Hong Kong. His suggestion of “forced decentralisation” (259), however, is not far removed from the existing development policies of Western donors. Unfortunately, Englebert does not give any consideration to the fact that it might be precisely the cumulative historical consequences of these policies which are problematic. One can only agree with him that African states constitute vast construction sites with quite a number of more or less derelict buildings in urgent need of renovation. And yet the problem may well lie precisely in the fact that there are too many well-meaning foreign architects wandering around on these building sites.

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