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REVIEWS ARTICLE

THE LONGUE DURÉE OF THE AFRICAN STATE

CHRISTOPHER CLAPHAM

Every now and then, something comes along which changes the way in which we think about our subject. Such a book is Jean-Francois Bayart's *The State in Africa*. The central theme of the book is its emphasis on what Bayart terms 'the historicity of the African state' (p. viii), by which he means that modern African politics can only be understood in relation to long-established traditions of government on the continent. This theme would, in the politics of most countries or continents, be taken for granted. We have no difficulty in appreciating that an understanding of British, or Italian, or Japanese politics must draw heavily on the historical development of these societies, and the traditions and attitudes embodied in them. In an African context, it is little short of revolutionary: what Bayart is seeking to do, in effect, is to replace the foundations on which our understanding of African states, and of African politics more generally, is built.

One can, without straining generalization too far, broadly discern a 'conventional' view of African politics which sees African states as essentially artificial and external creations, derived from an imposed European colonialism. These origins left African rulers, after independence, struggling with varying degrees of success to maintain, extend and indigenise the structures of government which the colonisers had left behind them, within externally defined territorial units which lacked any internal logic. The all too evident problems of African government—corruption, instability, ineffectiveness—can then conveniently be ascribed to the absence of 'fit' between this imported model and the Africa's fragmented economies, artificial state boundaries, and indigenous social structures and values.

Bayart has in earlier writings himself made interesting contributions to this conception of African politics, notably in a stimulating article on 'the revenge of African societies' which discussed some of the ways in which African peoples evade and undermine the state structures imposed on them. Here, however, he refers only apologetically to this work (p. 33), and has abandoned the idea of any contradiction between the values and

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2. This article has been translated, under the rather misleading title 'Civil Society in Africa', in P. Chabal, *Political Domination in Africa* (Cambridge U.P., 1986).
attitudes of Africans, and the ways in which they are governed. In its place, he draws heavily on an alternative conception, derived from the school of French historians whose outstanding figure is Fernand Braudel. Braudel has been impressed to the point of obsession with the continuities of particular human societies, and has seen the historian’s task as identifying the patterns which distinguish the long march of peoples down the centuries. His emphasis on the long term—\textit{la longue durée}—has become the rallying cry of his disciples, and it is this insight that Bayart has now sought to apply to Africa.

In a sense, then, Bayart’s task has been to reclaim for Africa the foundations of its own politics. Rejecting entirely the externally imposed models of ‘dependency’ and ‘modernisation’, drastically downplaying the influence of colonialism, he now regards the African state as the authentic expression of a ‘governmentality’ (or set of attitudes towards power and politics) which are deeply rooted in African historical experience. African states, in short, must be seen in their own terms, as the product of their own societies, and not merely as failed attempts to reproduce some model of government designed elsewhere.

Like many great and simple ideas, much of this strikes this reviewer at least as true, obvious and long overdue. It makes sense, first of all, in terms of a recognisable experience of African political life. Bayart’s account of African politics constantly draws on a sharp observation of politics on the ground, of the kind that almost invariably fails to fit with the grander social science models of political behaviour. The inhabitants of Bayart’s universe are real and generally very skilful politicians, operating on their own account, and not mere neocolonial puppets or conceptual constructs. No one who watches African politicians manipulating foreign states and aid agencies, for example, can be happy with the idea of an Africa ‘teleguided’ by outside powers. The book is crowded with stories (the account of the Zairean air force, pp. 235–6, is a particular gem) which demonstrate an eye for Africa as it exists. There is no attempt at quantification, or at the articulation of testable hypotheses, but rather a search for recognition. This in turn is backed by an extraordinarily wide range of reading, in English as well as in French, on a scale which few British academics could hope to match. Just as a source of bibliographical references, it is invaluable.

It is totally lacking, likewise, in the moralisation and the tedious search for blame which accompany much current writing on the ‘failures’ of African government. All this is irrelevant to Bayart, because it merely reflects the attempt to apply to Africa ideas of government which are inappropriate to the history of the continent and the conceptions of governmentality which its people have devised. Seen from the perspective of the Braudelian ‘\textit{longue durée}’, the actions of individual politicians are of
very limited significance, except insofar as they enable us to discern patterns of political behaviour which reflect the distinctive characteristics of the society which they govern. The function of the scholar, correspondingly, is not to preach or to make inevitably ineffectual attempts at ‘reform’, but simply to observe and understand. Bayart will certainly offend the politically correct, for whom a moral agenda is central, and may well be accused of tacitly condoning or even justifying the behaviour which he describes. Nor does he have any interest in other elements of correctness—he treats women, for example, merely as a resource which is competed for by men. But his detachment both provides an acute (if cynical) observation point for distinguishing the contours of African social and political life, and defines a sphere of legitimate academic activity which avoids the perils of immersion in agenda for political action.

So what are the features of this authentically African state which he finds living on into the modern era, only marginally affected by the intervening period of colonialism? Bayart is a million miles away from those who look to the African past for an idealised picture of a continent uncorrupted by the materialism and exploitation of the West. There are no wise old men sitting under a tree, and talking until they agree. The Africa that he identifies is characterized above all by the poverty of its material resource base, and by the need of those who have political power to gain control over economic resources. Whether in the hands of those who espouse ‘socialism’ as a device to legitimate the monopolisation of the economy by government, or those who like Houphouet Boigny or Kenyatta use their political role to further their private commercial opportunities (and Bayart sees no difference between the two), power is centrally concerned with access to wealth. This is the ‘politics of the belly’ which provides his subtitle. It is a preoccupation that offers very little hope to World Bank ‘privatisation’ projects, which promise merely to transfer resources from the formal control of the state, to the private portfolios of those who rule it; nor does it allow much scope for multiparty democratisation schemes, which likewise call for some discrimination between public and private spheres which in Bayart’s view is foreign to the African political tradition.

A further consequence of Africa’s impoverished productive base, moreover, is that African rulers have long sought to compensate for the inadequacies of their domestic economies by mobilising resources derived from their relationship with the outside world. This strategy, which Bayart refers to as ‘extraversion’, in turn accounts for much of Africa’s relationship with the outside world, and leads to many of the features of African political life which are (in his view) misleadingly characterised as dependence. ‘Unequal entry into the international system has been for several centuries a major and dynamic mode of the historicity of African societies, not the magical suspension of it’ (p. 27). Though the inequality
of the relationship is recognized, what interests Bayart is the use which African politicians make of it; the description of such politicians in externally derived terms, whether as nationalist heroes or as ‘collaborators’ with imperialism, is in his view entirely inappropriate. All of them are basically concerned to use external resources—from armaments on the one hand, to famine relief on the other—as a means of consolidating their own hold on power.

Among the other concepts or phrases which flow effortlessly from his pen, the most useful and important is what he terms the ‘reciprocal assimilation of elites’. By this he means the fusion of potentially competing elite social groups to form a single dominant national class, centred on the control of the state, which is certainly internally factionalised, but which does not divide into distinguishable social groupings. Any distinction between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ elites is belied by the usefulness of local authority structures as a basis for competing for national power, and the readiness with which educated national politicians take up local titles and offices; the division between bureaucracy and bourgeoisie is blurred by the dependence of African businessmen on government favour, and the readiness of many politicians (or their wives) to go into business on their own account; nor is it possible to separate ‘national’ from ‘comprador’ bourgeoisie, in economies so closely associated with external trade. Bayart is excellent on the social mechanisms, ranging from weddings and funerals through to freemasonries, through which this class is being consolidated, and also ascribes an unexpected significance to the single party as a form of elite assimilation.

Some of his other coinages are, at least in this reviewer’s judgement, rather less useful. A long section on the concept of ‘passive revolution’ (pp. 180–192) appears to indicate little more than a determination to find a use for one of Gramsci’s more obscure formulations, while the idea of the ‘rhizome state’ (which spreads underground and sends up shoots everywhere) has a certain charm, but only a rather doubtful application. Other chapters—on the instrumental uses of ethnicity, the mechanisms of surplus expropriation, the manipulation of political networks—take relatively familiar material, and integrate it into the overall theme.

What are we to make of all this? A dazzling essay rather than a survey or textbook, it provides constant stimulation, and will provide even those who feel themselves to be relatively familiar with the continent with fresh ideas and unexpected insights. Bayart gives relatively little attention to the insights of anthropologists, but there is ample scope for the re-examination of ethnicity as a source of those abiding attitudes to authority and politics which he regards as so important. There is virtually no mention of pastoralism, or the differences between herders and agriculturalists, or between forest and savannah, as elements which may
distinguish forms of governmentality, but within his overall approach it is easy to recognize that these may have significant effects. Though he aptly remarks that Zaireans have almost as many different words for extortion as the Eskimos have for snow, the potentially fascinating analysis of African languages as indicators of political attitudes is another avenue that remains to be explored.

There are nonetheless serious weaknesses in Bayart’s approach to African politics, and the methodological assumptions which underlie it. One of these, as Michael Twaddle aptly pointed out in his review of the French original, is that a book entitled The State in Africa actually has remarkably little to say about the state. At one level, this omission may be traced to Bayart’s preoccupation with process rather than structure, the behaviour of individuals rather than the role of institutions. At times, indeed, he seems to be not only uninterested in institutions, but even ignorant of them; his belief that the administration and the army actually do ‘bring together people of diverse social and geographical origins, ordering them around a common pole which is far away from the previous divisions and particularities of society’ (p. 168) is at variance not only with much of the actual working of such institutions—as the experience of military rule has all too clearly shown—but even with his own underlying approach. The dismissal of the differentiation of regime types (civil or military, capitalist or socialist, single party or multi-party) as a ‘pure waste of time’ (p. 211) is equally cavalier.

But more basically, institutions represent the realm of the imported, whereas behaviour represents the realm of the indigenous; and in ignoring one, while emphasising the other, Bayart indulges in a sleight of hand which enables him to pick on the continuities in the African political record, while passing over the enormous differences which have been made to Africa by the imposition on it of the modern post-colonial territorial state. Even the most autocratic of the pre-colonial African monarchies were organisations of a very different calibre from those which the colonial imprint and the transfer of external technologies have left in the continent. The ‘extraversion’ of Ashanti or Buganda did not run to the import of weapons of mass destruction, or to the maintenance of client regimes by means which range from the allocation of development aid to the imposition of foreign troops. The modern territorial state represents a new form of governance in Africa, and all the shifts by which African elites have sought to adapt it to their own preferred instruments of rule have not turned it into a familiar kind of African regime disguised behind the vocabulary of Weberian bureaucracy and Western developmentalism. In short, Bayart does not so much contest the conventional ‘externalist’ view of the post-colonial African state, as erect an alternative model alongside it.
The second deficiency is still more important. The Africa that emerges from Bayart’s pages has no famines, no civil wars or refugees, no collapsing states, no increasing populations or environmental decay, and virtually no economic failures, debt crises, or structural adjustment programmes. This is not a failure of moral concern: Bayart’s sense of academic detachment is entirely defensible, and is in addition accompanied by an awareness of the nasty things that many Africans have done to them, and an empathy with the continent and its peoples, which are worth any amount of pious moralising. More serious than that, it is a failure of analysis, and specifically, a failure of the Braudelian approach. Intensely geared as it is to the idea of continuity, it is peculiarly ill-adapted to the analysis of change, and indeed may readily lead its adherents to overlook that any significant change is even taking place. The picture is disconcertingly static, and the features that give the politics of post-colonial Africa its dynamism and much of its tension are almost entirely overlooked. Among the most worrying points in Bayart’s discussion are those in which he recognises developments which other authors would instantly regard as danger signals, and yet almost obstinately interprets them in terms which favour his own emphasis on continuity. Africa’s extremely uneven population age range, with a very high proportion of the population under fifteen, is taken not as evidence of a potentially unsustainable increase in population, but as indicating that only a relatively small number of people are in a position to compete for political goods. Structural adjustment policies (p. 226), far from undermining the capacity of political leaders to extract a surplus from transactions with the international economy, are perversely treated as enhancing it.

Behind this, in turn, is an assumption that—in its own peculiar fashion—the politics of sub-Saharan Africa actually works, and has indeed succeeded in generating an almost perfect fit with the society that underlies it.

Whatever the Africanist orthodoxy tells us, the precariousness of national political equilibria is not a manifestation of the organic inadequacy of the State, nor even a supplementary proof of its extraneity. On the contrary, it reveals its narrow symbiosis with the grassroots which sustain it. (p. 221)

The vision is ultimately a Burkean one, applied to societies under vastly greater stress than the late eighteenth century England about which Burke was writing. It leads (pp. 218–9) to an idealization of clientele systems, as providing an effective set of linkages between the mass of the population and the holders of political power, and even to a treatment of bribery in terms of the mechanisms of social solidarity, rather than those of elite exploitation.
The relationship between Bayart's emphasis on continuity from the African past, and his failure (as I would see it) to recognize the dynamics of the African present, is doubtless strengthened by his personal familiarity with a number of francophone West African states—especially Cameroun, but also Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire—which remain at least relatively viable. A study which drew instead on such states as Liberia, Uganda and Mozambique would present a very different story. This is not to deny the importance of 'historicity' as an element in African politics, but rather to question a certain complacency which it may induce in the understanding of the present. Ethiopia is explicitly excluded from the scope of Bayart's enquiry, but as the sub-Saharan state whose historical record more explicitly guides the current political agenda than in any other, it also demonstrates the dangers of divorcing the role of continuity from that of change: its historicity is not just a solution, but also a major problem. In short, Africa's historicity is more complex and ambiguous than Bayart's analysis recognises. It incorporates a variety of potentially conflicting elements, which derive much of their impact on modern political life from the stimulus provided by other forces, and notably by the mechanisms through which Africa has been incorporated into the international system.

Bayart's achievement, then, is to provide a stimulating corrective to a view of African politics which has much too heavily emphasised the external at the expense of the indigenous, while also rectifying a simplistic and ludicrously idealised picture of what the African political tradition actually consists in. But the answers are to be found, not in the replacement of the external by the indigenous, but in the dynamic (and often disastrous) combination of the two, which furnishes a dynamic of African political life which—in his straining after continuity—Bayart has wilfully ignored. Essential reading this certainly must be, but ultimately it does not provide a comprehensive nor even an adequate account of the state in Africa.