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REVIEW ARTICLE

DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA?

Tom Young

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> 'Democracy' was a new beginning, and *shari'a* is what people democratically want as their new beginning. Madeleine Albright, when visiting Kano recently, was taken aback when thanked (albeit ironically) for introducing *shari'a*: 'but it's due to democracy,' she was told. [Last, 2000]

Not so long ago people of broadly liberal persuasion were writing about democracy in Africa in tones of wonder: it was a second 'liberation', a second 'independence'—indeed, if not a Second Coming then at least a 'virtual miracle'. More, democracy seemed to be the magic key to further treasures: accountability, transparency, equality, social justice, even conflict resolution and 'development'. This is curious, as people of liberal persuasion elsewhere (in the past and now) have been reserved, even scathing, about democracy. Schumpeter's gloomy ruminations (1954) are of course well known, but the ritual reference to these points hardly captures the extent of the deeply sceptical nature of liberal reflections on democracy.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH DEMOCRACY?

These misgivings tend to turn on two sets of issues: what democracy is

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supposed to do and its claims to moral superiority. Simplifying somewhat, the first issue comes down to what exactly democracy aggregates. There is a bewilderingly large list of candidates (as it were), including wants, preferences, interests or wills, and, to make things worse, attached to them all are complex theoretical issues and debates. Since it is these that tend to shape stances on the more familiar issues of representation, accountability, legitimacy, trust and the like it is clear that, to say the least, there is a formidable clutch of problems. Not the least is the possibility that democracy does not actually aggregate anything at all. For analytical purposes these issues can be separated (though in reality, of course, the two constantly interweave) from the second set of explicitly normative issues concerning the moral claims of democratic institutions and values. Here again there is the possibility that democracy may not embody persuasive normative superiority.[1] Both sets of issues are additionally posed on what may be called extrinsic terrains. On the more sociological side, what effects is democracy likely to have, and on the normative side whether its presumed superiority concerns its effects rather than its intrinsic virtues. One may note finally that, in the current global situation, these sets of issues make another appearance as regards the feasibility of and justification for imposing such political orders on others who may be judged to be without them.

Adopting a now familiar usage in political theory, one might suggest two kinds of responses to these problems. 'Thin' theories may be said to comprise those positions which see democracy, and particularly elections, as essentially aggregating individual choices of policies (invariably presumed to be an effect of given 'interests' or 'preferences') and, realistically, as these are packaged by competing political parties, themselves largely identified with particular leaders. Such minimalist accounts of democracy cohere well with the minimalist understanding of the liberal state itself in which the state is purely an enabler, little more than a neutral mechanism providing the security to allow free, equal individuals to pursue their life projects, unhindered by others. The public interest is essentially the pursuit of private interest, and it follows that the virtues of democracy lie largely in its consequences, the promotion of individual freedom and social welfare. In this conception politics plays a small part in people's lives—appropriately so, as 'a citizenry that is in full democratic cry [cannot] be accommodated for very long in a liberal democratic state' (Benjamin and Elkin, 1985: 193). But for every such thin assertion there is a thick counter-assertion such as that 'a democratic society cannot flourish if its citizens merely pursue their own narrow interests' (Audi, 1998: 149). Thick conceptions of democracy are more difficult to summarise briefly but they tend to be much less persuaded of the centrality of preferences partly because the assumed endogeneity of preferences seems sociologically implausible; because welfare and preference satisfaction can be seen as

[1] See Copp *et al.* (1993) for a good guide to sophisticated liberal debate about democracy.

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different things; and because the value of freedom is understood as the kind of autonomy that 'requires both the possibility of satisfying my desires and the possibility of standing beyond them' (Fleischacker, 1999: 77). The implication of these sorts of positions is that democracy, far from being understood as an aggregation (or trade-off) of preferences, can be seen only as a transformation of preferences that culminates in collective judgements.

ACHIEVING DEMOCRACY

On its own account at least, political science/sociology brackets these considerations on grounds of the imperatives of social science measurement and comparability, its task being to identify the conditions in which certain kinds of political rule appear. These questions have of course subdivided and been approached in different ways though it is difficult in fact to make hard-and-fast distinctions. But, broadly speaking, positions on the dynamics of democratisation have tended to divide between those who, in a more structural vein, emphasise the preconditions of democracy, whether these are understood as structural (economic development, a strong middle class, minimum levels of education of the mass population, functioning bureaucracies and so on) or cultural/behavioural (social capital, civic virtues and so on) (famously Lipset, 1959). A second stance comprises those who, in more action-orientated vein, assert that, as political action and judgement make a difference, there can be more or less successful strategies of democratisation (famously Rustow, 1970). Sandwiched between these, arguably, are historical structural accounts that seek to connect collective action with certain critical historical periods determined by social structures (Moore, 1967; Rueschmeyer *et al.*, 1992). All these positions have implications for any understanding of the consolidation of democracy. For the more structuralist ones consolidation tends to imply fairly rapid social change needed to sustain democratic practice. For those who focus on strategies and action, consolidation turns on the socialising effects simply the acceptance of and habituation into the rules of the game (acceptance of electoral results, legitimacy of opposition and so on). The whole issue of international dynamics supervenes on these more fundamental concerns; normative questions aside, what external interventions are likely to bring about democracy and to sustain it as a form of rule? The key point is that political science adopts the limit case of thin theories that democracy aggregates little or nothing and is rather to be defined by the mass selection of political leaders in conditions of political freedom.

AFRICANIST CONCERNS

The Africanist literature generally more or less follows these contours, though there are also emphases peculiar to the region. Generalising, it might be suggested that three large questions have preoccupied the

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literature. The first concerns whether the post-Cold War 'wave of democracy' was externally or internally driven. One view suggests that African leaders and ruling circles were forced under pressure from the outside world (however understood) to make institutional changes, while an opposing view asserts that democratisation is a result of pressure from below, the rejection by mass populations of failed one-party states. The second concerns the degree to which democratic institutions are likely to survive and become permanent. A substantial part of the debate about this question turns on matters of African political culture—indeed, African culture more generally. A third issue which perhaps looms over, rather than informs, the Africa debate is what the consequences of democracy may be. This is closely related, ultimately, to views about consolidation, but it is certainly widely hoped that democracy will enhance development and reduce ethnic and other conflict-inducing tensions; some analysts also take the view that, without progress on these fronts, consolidation is unlikely.

Bratton and van de Walle's book may be taken as a model of the political science approach being a tightly structured, explicitly comparative and consciously constructed according to the canons of a rigorous, positivist social science. From a number of elements of contemporary social theory they fashion what they term a political-institutional approach which, ingeniously, while distancing itself from now discredited accounts that simply reproduced the illusory discourse of African states, nonetheless wishes to reassert the central importance of political institutions, even if they are informal ones. Although they see politics as a set of 'nested' relationships between traditions, regimes and institutions (and the relations between these are not entirely clear) the theoretical focus mandates a concentration on regimes ('aggregate clusters of interlocking institutions', p. 44), a focus which provides three particular advantages for the understanding of regime transitions, namely an emphasis on political actors, a foregrounding of the political rules of the game and a way to account for regularities and variations across countries and continuities and changes over time (pp. 42–5).

Their substantive analysis is pivoted around a neo-patrimonialist account of the African state and politics since Independence in which such states are held to be hybrid, that is, the appearance of a rational legal state coexists with a patrimonial logic which roughly designates personalist forms of political practice characterised by the private appropriation of public resources and the construction of networks of clients as the main form of rule. Around this common core are variations along the axes (borrowed from Dahl) of political competition and participation generating five 'modal variants of African political regimes that embody distinct combinations of political participation and political competition' (p. 77). The final pay-off for all this theoretical effort is a series of generalisations about transition from neo-patrimonialism that suggest (compressing them slightly) that transition is driven by (popular) forces outside the regime, that it tends to be zero-sum in nature, that it centrally concerns the

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establishment of new political rules-of the-game and that the middle class sides with the opposition.

This makes possible a general account of African democratisation as an effect of a crisis of neo-patrimonialism combined with the particular institutional legacies of African states. Such systems necessarily generate economic crisis, and although the account of this is not always clear (whether for example it is the general economic failure that precipitates difficulties or the exclusion of particular groups), what is central is that the economic crisis undermines the resource base on which the whole personalist edifice rests. This system reached crisis point in the late 1980s as its legitimacy was eroded by a combination of persistent failure to improve conditions with increasingly visible corruption. As Bratton and van de Walle put it pithily, 'those with access to political office were living high on the hog while ordinary people suffered' (p. 99) Although most protest was driven initially by economic hardship it was only a matter of time before these two sides of the crisis came together and popular protest took on a political form, first linking economic grievances with financial mismanagement, then becoming explicitly more political, in the sense of demanding political change, as new opposition groups emerged.

The most ambitious part of their analysis goes beyond a general characterisation of the patterns of crisis of patrimonial regimes and the general shape of the transitions to new forms of political order but suggests that regime transitions are shaped by the institutional legacy of preceding political regimes (p. 139). The immediate implications of this approach are that economic factors do not correlate with democratisation and that, although Bratton and van de Valle are prepared to concede a little more weight to international factors, these are reduced to a (fairly residual) contextual role. The weightier implications are that 'pressures for political change emanate from within the borders of affected countries and that regime transitions are propelled principally by a constellation of indigenous political actors and institutions' (p. 223). Despite the clarity of their assertions puzzles remain. One concerns the appearance and disappearance of 'modal regimes'. If these are formulated on the basis of clusterings of participation and competition it is hard to see why they form no part of the subsequent analysis. Second, while the earlier parts of the book vigorously stress the centrality of institutional legacies, towards the end these become muted. The effects of institutional legacies become 'more oblique than direct' (p. 221), indeed 'the direct effects of institutional legacies were too feeble to be included in an overall account of the process of democratisation'. As this last claim appears to be at variance with many others (cf. p. 271) at least some clarification is called for.

Few authors make such determined attempts to generalise across such a wide range (some forty-plus) of cases. A more conventional format is the edited collection of case studies prefaced by a general overview that tries to make some generalisation from the cases. Daniel, Southall and Szeftel, Cowen and Laakso and Olukoshi all take this route. These contributions immediately draw attention to the perennial

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problems of case study and generalisation but also indicate the (as I would argue) impossibility of holding to minimalist definitions of democracy. Like Bratton and van de Walle almost all the authors are concerned to characterise African politics in general and many rely on some variant of the notion of neo-patrimonialism. But there are clear differences of emphasis. In Bratton and van de Walle neo-patrimonialism has an almost mystical presence; it explains everything and seems to come from nowhere (it is 'age-old', p. 27). For Szeftel and his co-authors, by contrast, African politics needs to be seen as rooted in economic underdevelopment characterised by dependence and unevenness. Although Africans looked to the state as the means to overcome this legacy it was ill equipped to do so, having been created for the purposes of colonial rule. Nor was the state constrained by 'civil society', for the rapidity of the transition meant that, when it came, politics took a clientelist form in which 'local power brokers were incorporated into national political movements and electoral support was exchanged for access to state resources'. (Daniel *et al*., p. 14). Although clientelism is central to this analysis it was something that at least some African states tried to manage (either succeeding in doing so via bureaucratic centralism or failing to do so and collapsing into a spoils system) rather than a hybrid form.

There are some advantages in this account, not the least Szeftel's (surely correct) observation that 'the African leaders who imposed one-party regimes were not all charlatans or despots by inclination' (p. 16), a welcome contrast to Bratton and van de Walle, whose social science mask occasionally slips to reveal such rigorous scientific concepts as 'supremo' and 'sycophantic lieutenants' (Bratton and van de Walle: 84).[2] This derives in part from a rather more cautious attitude to patrimonialism as personalist appropriation of office and a greater emphasis on clientelism (see Szeftel's detailed account of Zambia in Daniel *et al*.). The account of the crisis is, however, similar in that such political forms ceased to be economically sustainable as patronage resources became insufficient. The difference between the two types continued, in that bureaucratic centralist states were more likely to be able to undertake democratisation reforms.

Both these volumes share an emphasis on institutions, with Daniel *et al*. devoting two chapters to electoral systems and the monitoring of elections. Daniel and Southall insist that 'there is a renewed appreciation of the importance of institutions for engineering and maintaining domestic political peace' (Daniel *et al*., p. 240). But Bratton and van de Walle's emphasis derives from their theoretical model, which makes institutional practices central—it is institutions

[2] For reasons to be sceptical as to whether the understanding of post-Independence African politics is entirely exhausted by the image of supremos shovelling money into their Swiss bank accounts see the chapter by Mkandiware in Wohlgemuth *et al*. (1999). Cf. from a rather different angle Sender (1999).

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themselves which are likely to 'dictate the success or failure of Africa's democratic experiments' (p. 242). Both, however, agree that a key issue is the 'underdevelopment' of civil society, but it is fair to say that the contributors to Daniel *et al.*, precisely because of their more economically oriented account of the African crisis, place more weight on such formulas as 'meaningful participation' (p. 18) and 'people's empowerment' (p. 245). Finally we may note that most of these authors, despite their verbal disdain for modernisation theory, are completely committed to modernisation as a project and in terms, political correctness aside, that modernisation theory would have no difficulty with. If there is a difference it concerns the role marked out for civil society, with those on the left seeing the modernisation project reconstituted as a civil society-led development.

The positions espoused by at least some of the contributors to the collections edited by Cowen and Laakso and Olukoshi are significantly different. Cowen and Laakso begin with an extremely useful survey of electoral studies in Africa, one of whose virtues is the attention it pays to the political and ideological circumstances of such studies, a theoretical awareness and reflexivity that extend to the contested nature of democracy itself. They are followed in this by some of their contributors, who are prepared to entertain more radical notions of democratisation in terms of both analysis and normative assumptions. Thus Neocosmos, looking at elections in Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, suggests that elections may have a limitation function that 'deflect, contain and limit alternative politics to insignificant enclaves which are easily controllable or isolated' (Cowen and Laakso, p. 28), a perspective which he develops in some detail in his contribution on South Africa in the Olukoshi volume. Rudebeck similarly wants to extend democracy beyond its conventional procedural limitations to processes involving the attainment of political equality—'actual and effective participation in the making of decisions on matters of common concern and significance' (Cowen and Laakso, p. 105). On the basis of these kinds of arguments Kanyinga and Olukoshi posit two distinct 'schools', one working in a liberal/neo-liberal framework and the other in a popular politics school focusing 'on the promise and limitations of indigenous social/popular movements for Africa's democratic transition' (Olukoshi, p. 39). In so far as this construction is plausible it would seem to account for the fact that some of these authors are, at the least, uneasy with the conventional notions of neo-patrimonialism. Olukoshi is stridently so, dismissing in one sentence virtually all the widely used labels of Africanist political science (patron–clientelism, neo-patrimonialism, 'economy of affection', etc.) but unfortunately the basis of his complaints remains rather vague, as does that of some other contributors to his volume (Kanyinga) and to Cowen and Laakso's (Gould). Olukoshi himself is clear that the villain of the piece is a combination of the impact of the oil crises on African economies and the effects of structural adjustment programmes, including a tendency on their part to sustain various forms of political authoritarianism.

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This reading of African democratisation, precisely because it sees that phenomenon as considerably shaped for external consumption and largely against pro-democracy forces within African societies, is rather more relaxed about the relation between internal and external factors. Olukoshi, for example, talks about a 'dovetailing' of internal and external factors and reminds us of such issues as the outside funding of political and civil society organisations, a process he dubs 'donorisation' (p. 32). These authors are much less concerned to establish the marginality of international influences and much more ready to concede that, as in Malawi, 'multi-party electoral competition belongs to the paraphernalia of liberal democracy that keeps international donors content' (Englund, in Cowen and Laakso, p. 184) and in Zambia 'the discourse about the rules of the game was increasingly performed for the purpose of satisfying these foreign constituencies' (Gould, in Cowen and Laakso, p. 303). But if much of the democratisation process is for external consumption, the alternative strategy appropriate to indigenous pro-democracy forces remains obscure and problematic. Rudebeck, for all his emphasis on popular sovereignty, has scant patience for those backsliders with a tendency to 'escape into traditional, "ethnic" ideas and hopes, even dreams and illusions, away from the problems and difficulties of modernisation' (Cowen and Laakso, p. 115; cf. pp. 118 and 124 for what Professor Rudebeck does approve of). Olukoshi similarly finds that 'communalist, religious, ethnic and regionalist identities have mushroomed', driven largely it would seem, by worsening economic conditions (Olukoshi, p. 28). This can be resolved only by reviving the developmental state and a new 'social contract'. The political motivations of the masses are largely driven by economic welfare considerations; only when these are improved can their commitment to democracy be secured.

THE QUESTION OF CULTURE

In the light of this it is of considerable interest that some contributors to these volumes seek in some ways to go beyond such visions of modernisation and explore popular understandings of politics as they are rather than as they should be, implicitly raising issues of culture both as a mode of explanation and as a normativity. Thus Englund in his chapter on Malawi in Cowen and Laakso seems to be feeling his way, via notions of coexistence and interpenetration of ideas and institutions, towards exploring 'indigenous democratic resources (p. 185). Though the argument is at times a trifle obscure, generalising from his analysis of burial societies in Blantyre which embody a notion of 'moral partnership', Englund suggests, surely rightly, that the 'scope of the "political" must be enlarged to include practices and institutions that have no obvious place in liberal political science' (p. 185). Similarly Jeremy Gould in his close-grained analysis of electoral politics in Luapula Province, Zambia (Cowen and Laakso, chapter 12), finds that, while multi-party politics has created space for more open political manoeuvring against unpopular leaders, 'traditional' actors may occupy

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that space and wield it 'against the kind of clientelism that maintains an authoritarian and patrimonial state apparatus' (p. 321). As eager as Englund to dismiss 'primordial', even 'cultural' or 'ethnic' explanations, he suggests that 'in Zambia, chiefs do personify a notion of local and autonomous community that seems to be gaining currency as neo-liberal policies undermine the material foundations of the post-colonial state' (p. 322).

In the context of these accounts Schatzberg's rather blunderbuss condemnation of Africanist political science may seem a trifle unfair. But he is not of course wrong to suggest that large parts of African experience, notably witchcraft and the occult, are excluded from the works of political science. In plunging his readers into that world he throws down a challenge to political science.

From the sources he examined Schatzberg suggests a pervasive presence of familial themes in African political discourse—presidents as fathers, the similarity of nation and family—from which he distils four salient ones concerning the father-chief, the limits of consumption, the positioning of women in the social order and the alternation of power, though these are not claimed to be exhaustive. Linked with them are a set of local understandings of 'how key political concepts, such as power, are intuitively and implicitly defined; of what constitutes the parameters of the political kingdom; and of how individuals comprehend the forces of political causality (p. 35). It is never quite clear what the connection is between the moral matrix and the understandings of power (cf. the different formulas on pp. 35 and 201) but the essential point is that these are both local and make it possible to map what Schatzberg calls the 'politically subjacent', meaning by this term roughly the deep working assumptions that people have about what is thinkable or not in the political realm. On this analysis local concepts of power understand it as 'the ability to control and consume both resources and individuals' (p. 69). Africans do not make sharp separations between a formal realm of power and other aspects of life (p. 107), and many Africans recognise modes of political causality other than those understood in Western concepts: 'many middle Africans understand sorcery as a mode of causality because they are persuaded that the forces of the night exert an influence on daily events and national politics' (p. 113).

This approach has the advantage of foregrounding forms of power outside the state (p. 38), of raising the question why certain forms of discourse are used and persist; and of problematising the universality and applicability of concepts. But in insisting on the close attention that is due to political language and political thought (outside the realm of formal texts) Schatzberg also finds himself confronting some of the most horribly difficult questions of social theory. Here I comment on only two issues (quite unfairly, given the richness of the book) that have a bearing on democracy and the other literature considered here.

The first concerns explanation and culture. In several places Schatzberg insists that the moral matrices and other understandings he isolates are not explanatory (pp. 34, 213) but he never really makes it

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clear how they do contribute to (presumably other kinds of) explanations. (Constant references to 'responsive chords' and the like only take us so far: pp. 13, 23, 202.) But it is clear that, perhaps in unguarded moments, he does think they have explanatory import. He repeatedly mentions 'a different culture' (p. 108), that politicians 'understand that in their culture power is unitary and cannot be divided into separate boxes' (p. 74), that 'there is still a recognisable configuration of political and cultural factors that gives the politics and political cultures of these states a certain analytical cohesiveness' (p. 215). The tensions here, one suspects, are connected with worries about culture. But when Schatzberg isn't looking over his shoulder worrying about 'essentialism' (a wise precaution in contemporary academia, admittedly: he worries about it explicitly on p. 205 but implicitly throughout his text) what he is saying is that these are different cultures and that this fact has some explanatory weight. Indeed, his parting shot (though there are allusions to it throughout the book) is that 'perhaps the biggest impediment to democratic practice in middle Africa is the notion of the unity and indivisibility of power. If 'power is eaten whole' throughout much of the region, how can it possibly be shared among competing and contending forces in a democracy?' (p. 221; cf. p. 62). Definitional niceties aside, what this amounts to is that Western notions of (liberal) democracy do not fit easily with many cultures.

The second point concerns categories and their universality. Schatzberg repeatedly asserts that Western political science has assumed the universality of its concepts (pp. 39, 70, 72, 101) and therefore substantially misunderstood African societies. But his reading of these matters is deeply puzzling, for two reasons. First, and trivially, can so many clever, hard-thinking people all just have made the same mistake, carelessly imagining that they could simply apply the same concepts to African societies that were appropriate to their own—a mistake that will be dissipated as soon as they read Schatzberg's book? Second, and much more important, because in reality the assumptions of Western social and political theory are almost the opposite of his description of them. As the mainstream literature on African politics shows, the problem is that the spheres (the state, the economy, religion) do not exist or, at the least, are not properly policed (cf. Daniel *et al.*, p. 13). It is precisely because certain binary distinctions are not universal that they become so central to the analysis; or rather, so to speak, they are universal in nature but not yet in culture.

READING THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC PROJECT

Reflection on this last issue points to unpacking Cowen and Laakso's remark that 'elite democracy . . . has been foisted upon reluctant non-elective dictatorships by economically dominant classes who have been excluded from state power: professionals and middle classes, international donors and financial institutions' (p. 24). It is important to stress the democracy part of this formulation, as there is of course plentiful

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evidence in these studies, and elsewhere, that Africans have welcomed their release from the excesses of the incompetent and vicious regimes that have ruled so many of them. As Pietila *et al.* put it for Tanzania, 'it is the political liberalisation in general, rather than the electoral competition, where the fruits of multi-partyism are most appreciated' (Cowen and Laakso, p. 298; cf., for Guinea-Bissau, p. 123). But the end of such regimes does not necessarily guarantee an understanding of the conditions that make them possible or a consensus that what should replace them is liberal democracy (indeed, rather unimaginative versions thereof). Yet almost all the studies reported here provide copious evidence that there is conspicuously little policy debate of any kind among political parties, much less about how (even) liberal democracy might be organised in the special circumstances of their societies. By contrast it is noticeable that there has been overwhelming concern, on the part of certain kinds of African elites and their external allies, with removing leaders who are seen as an obstacle to further modernisation or the crafting of new kinds of modernising coalitions. Such concern fits most comfortably with approaches to democracy that see it as little more than a public choice of political leaders.

Beyond this, however, it is widely agreed that democratic systems are unlikely to survive without at least some social buttressing, but it is precisely at this point that formulaic slogans about the 'will of the people' appear increasingly inadequate. The more mainstream literature is commendably honest in acknowledging that the problem is that Africa's 'weak private sector as well as small middle and professional classes are likely to prove incapable of constituting an autonomous power base to balance and circumscribe state power' (Bratton and van de Walle, pp. 238–9). It follows, surely, on this analysis that democratisation is essentially about reversing this state of affairs.[3] Formulations of this kind suggest much more than the periodic re-election of political leaders: a project that involves the creation of the 'right sort' of civil society, consisting of individuals and organised interests, organised within the limits of liberal capitalism. These considerations in turn immediately confront another widely reported research finding, that the new democracies have made little effort to represent rural interests (except as far as they are understood by internal or external planning agencies) (Olukoshi, p. 32). As Nkiwane puts it in the context of Zimbabwe, though the question surely stretches further, 'Who does the opposition aspire to represent? (Olukoshi, p. 106). It is, of course, true that many African regimes are well entrenched in the rural areas but the relation between the new parties of multi-party democracy and rural populations surely warrants further research. One might hazard the argument that what modernisation means is precisely the disembedding of people from their cultures and communities and it

[3] This seems much more plausible than Bratton and van de Walle's ritual incantations about the 'will of the people' (pp. 7, 195) or the 'common good' (p. 10), unless of course those terms axiomatically designate a strong private sector and a large middle class.

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can therefore be understood as 'the increase of individualism and individuality' (Wagner, 1994: 6). But it is also about re-embedding individuals in new forms of social groups which, even if they are not wholly reduced to the impersonality of the state and the market, come to depend substantially on those forms of social order.

Finally there is the vexed question of the role of the outside (overwhelmingly the Western) world. The debate will doubtless continue as to that role in the transition. I still find the absence of transitions before 1989, and their subsequent simultaneity and rapidity, hard to explain by internal factors (could the crisis of patrimonialism really have broken out in so many states at the same time and with the same result?), though for some of these authors it is 'mere synchronicity' (Bratton and van de Walle, p. 30). Looking at the current situation, two points are worth making. Firstly the West's stance on democratisation is tactical and subject to a variety of political calculations—ignoring *coups* against elections which produced the wrong results (Algeria), interfering in domestic politics to produce the right result (Nicaragua), downplaying the democratic agenda in relations with countries that are real powers (China). But the cynical response to this which sees democracy talk as 'just rhetoric' misses (as do Bratton and van de Walle, cf. p. 241) a whole series of ways in which 'the international' needs to be understood, including different types of Western agency, the relations between them, and relations with different levels of target states and a burgeoning international legal regime.[4]

All these points suggest, perhaps more controversially, there is material here also for reflection on the nature and role of social science. A casual but accurate one-liner in Cowen and Laakso, that 'the current emphasis on the ideal of civil society in the current literature on Africa has repeated the older liberal ideal of the "middle class"' (p. 21) is surely worth exploring. It is hard to resist the thought that the pervasive use of the terminology of, say, civil society or 'social capital' is hardly just the result of the discovery of new social realities but much more to do with the, as it were, periodic rebranding of the core concerns of Western social and political theory. This heretical thought prompts another: as Englund puts it, 'Liberal democracy, in effect, is a new gospel which is spread by even the most measured texts of political scientists' (Cowen and Laakso, p. 185). An intriguing possibility: that some of this social science, its bold claims to objectivity and neutrality notwithstanding, is as much involved in constituting its objects as are the agencies that fund it; a possibility that may throw some light on how the many meanings of democracy are to be understood.[5]

[4] Brown (2001) raises many of these issues. See Fox and Roth (2001) for attempts to build a regime.

[5] Butler (1998) suggests ways in which political science may be shaped by broader political agendas. See chapter 4.

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