

Africa Project Graduate Student Reports

Eduardo Dargent, *University of Texas, Austin*

Taking part in the APSA workshop in Dakar was an enriching experience for my understanding of comparative politics. My research is focused on Latin America and my experience with African politics before the workshop was limited. Even if I would not dare call myself an expert in Africa after just one month in Senegal, I would like to discuss a difference and a similarity between these regions that I found surprising. The workshop reminded me of the title of Wim Wender's movie *Far Away, So Close*.

Several similarities between the two regions can be found: the weakness of democratic institutions, the negative effect of poverty on political participation, and the encumbered power of presidents over national politics. However, I would like to focus my comments on another similarity that made me feel at home from the first day of the workshop: the understanding of political science as a practical tool, as a discipline that has to provide solutions to political problems. When I started my Ph.D. program in the U.S. four years ago, I was surprised of how detached academia was from politics. I learned to appreciate this scientific/diagnostic approach as, I believe, it allows us to take some distance from our object of study and provides some salutary objectivity in our research. However, the debates in Dakar reminded me of how political science is, understandably, subject to very different demands in developing countries. Questions were not: why are political parties/civil society weak in Africa (Latin America)? Why is horizontal accountability limited in Africa (Latin America)? How is democracy related to ethnic violence? Rather, the questions were overwhelmingly related to how to achieve stronger parties and

horizontal accountability, reinforce civil society, or how to stop ethnic violence. Obviously this approach leads to a stronger focus on political agency and institutionalism as practical solutions to political problems. Those more inclined to structural explanations for political phenomena, such as myself, had little to offer in regard to practical solutions.

Myriad differences can be found between the two regions: socioeconomic ones (literacy rates, GDP per capita, etc.) or the degree of ethnic divisiveness, among others. The difference I would like to highlight relates to the power of the African state and its relation with social forces. The cooptation of social actors by the government seems easier and more straightforward than in my region of study. The debates in the workshop taught me how African dominant parties in control of the state are able to achieve considerable stability and win elections with comfortable majorities. The use and abuse of clientelistic ties to assure the vote of the majority, alliances with rural actors, and the cooptation of student organizations and unions are all strategies that have the goal of achieving political stability and continuity. Obviously, violence is exerted also to some degree, but compliance seems to be assured by the control over state resources. The state, then, seems to be a prime mover in African politics to an even greater degree than in Latin America where other social forces, such as business or regional ones, can contest its power. How does the relationship between the state and social forces affect the consolidation of democracy or the formation of opposition political parties in these regions? I believe comparing these two regions in this regard opens interesting future avenues of research.

Gustavo Rivera, *University of Texas, Austin*

Understanding what happened at the 2008 Africa Workshop in Dakar is important for at least two reasons.

First, the fact that the workshop gathered more than 25 students and scholars from all across Africa—not only Francophone, but also Anglophone and Luciphone Africa—to discuss openly the dimensions of political participation in the region shows the existing interest in establishing closer links between American and African academics. This is important because Africa has been for a long time a highly understudied region in American-based political science, which makes it a fertile ground for extensive academic progress. The 2008 Africa Workshop shows that the opportunity cost associated with not collaborating more frequently with scholars abroad is probably much higher than we think. Africa is a region in great need but has a large network of highly qualified scholars waiting for and willing to collaborate with colleagues abroad in pursue of a common goal: the improvement of living conditions and the quality of political participation in Africa. Personally, I learned the importance of collaborating with and listening to colleagues abroad. The group of students and scholars I met in Dakar showed me, through anecdotes and their original research, the incredible diversity and wealth of the region as well as the vexing contradictions and obstacles the African continent is facing today.

Second, as a result of having invited an incredibly diverse group of students and scholars to sit at the same table to discuss the highly-contested topic of political participation, the workshop challenged all participants and workshop leaders to defend their academic and pedagogic approaches in front of a thoughtful audi-

ence; that is, one that was not easily impressed. This is important because American and American-based scholars are frequently accused abroad of parochialism or engaging in “academic imperialism”—just as “foreign scholars” are quite often accused in the United States of not being “scientific enough”—which has led to little contact and collaboration between the two. The workshop demonstrated that when scholars—on both sides of the table—stop hiding behind inflexible approaches, the commonalities are in fact greater than the differences. From this experience I understood that we can learn from students and scholars abroad just as much as we can teach them. In the end, if ours is truly an academic enterprise whose ultimate goal is to develop a more precise understanding of the causes and effects of political events around the world, a call for greater cross-regional and interdisciplinary collaboration between scholars should sound redundant by now.

It is truly exciting to know that this workshop was the first in a series of three conferences to be held in the same number of years in the region. The challenges, however, are still multifarious. For now, the biggest lessons I learned from this experience are to listen carefully to what others have to say, and to take full advantage of the opportunities that exist today. In Dakar we gathered only 25 out of dozens, maybe hundreds, of highly qualified scholars willing to and interested in collaborating with their American and American-based counterparts. Thus, I reiterate, taking full advantage of the opportunities that exist while knowing how to listen are two indispensable requisites for future progress in political science, particularly for students of African politics.

I found the APSA political participation workshop to be a very rewarding experience. The workshop afforded participants an excellent opportunity to present research, learn new methodologies, review important literature, and become a member of a network of talented researchers. There are several outcomes that particularly stand out in my mind.

APSA was able to assemble a group of participants that represent the rich diversity of research traditions in political science. The participants' diverse methodological backgrounds contributed to the strength of the workshop. Participants with a more historical approach learned to marshal other methods to make their research more rigorous. By the same token, participants who subscribe to a more quantitative approach were pushed to more fully examine the mechanisms at work in their models. In addition, participants who had not had a great deal of exposure to quantitative methods learned more about the approach. Leonard Wantchekon's presentation of his recent paper that deals with political legacies of the African slave trade illustrated how multi-method research can produce compelling work. Wantchekon's paper nicely demonstrated how different approaches are complementary.

One of the important outcomes of the workshop was instruction on how to properly frame a paper in order to help its chances of publication. The papers presented at the workshop ranged from proposal stage to a near publishable state. There were many papers that offered compelling results yet the organization, or approach, of the paper obscured the findings. By discussing published articles and their theoretical approaches, workshop participants became better informed on how to organize their arguments. This will hopefully increase the amount of publishable work emanating from Africa.

Perhaps one of the most encouraging developments was the talk of future collaboration between participants. Moreover, the workshop created a network that will continue to cultivate important research. For example, a scholar interested in legislative elections with a desire to obtain data will now have potential research partners in eight other countries. There is a limited amount

of good data available in Africa and contacts such as these should prove invaluable.

In addition to the workshop sessions there were ample social events designed to allow the participants to interact in less academic settings. One such event was an excursion to Gorée Island that allowed the participants to meet and engage in a less formal setting. Moreover, the opening and closing ceremonies of the workshop gave participants the chance to meet some of Senegal's leading political leaders and intellectuals. These opportunities provided a much needed break from work but still fostered discussions that were work related.

I was able to personally profit from the workshop in several ways. First, I was able to present a paper before the group of participants. The paper uses public opinion data to look at the causes of political violence in Africa and the feedback that I received from the participants was useful. Participants pointed out variables that I may have omitted and also suggested alternative arguments. Second, I was able to discuss potential research agendas with my African counterparts, particularly those from Burkina Faso. In December of this year I will be starting a Fulbright fellowship in Burkina Faso and it was useful to become more familiar with the Burkinabé scholars. Finally, I hope to co-author a paper with one of the Burkinabé scholars I met at the workshop.

As a final note, the key role that WARC played in hosting the workshop must be mentioned. Having had previous experience in West Africa, I was eager to help APSA with logistical arrangements or other matters. As it turned out my services were little needed, as WARC was a more than capable host and their staff made the participants and APSA staff feel at ease. In Senegalese French the term for well connected is *branché* and the WARC staff was indeed very *branché*. Academic, technical, and personal needs were ably handled by the WARC staff. In one instance the WARC staff was able to rapidly resolve a visa issue that impeded a workshop participant at the Dakar airport. In short, the staff at WARC was outstanding.

Robin Harding, *New York University*

Taking part in the 2008 APSA Workshop on Political Participation was a fantastic opportunity for me and an immensely rewarding experience.

The convening of such a varied group of African scholars, with detailed and expert knowledge of political participation in countries across Africa, provided me with an immensely rich and vital resource. Far better than any library or the Internet, the ability to tap into and engage with this wealth of information allowed me to instantly locate my own research ideas in their relevant and necessary contexts. Moreover, this is a resource that was available to all of the participants and that that will persist beyond Dakar through the network of researchers that the workshop has created. It is links of this kind that I believe allow for the sharing of knowledge and expertise, and for the diffusion and development of ideas, that make for successful comparative political research.

Three weeks is a long time to spend on a theme like political participation, and a lot of ground was covered during the course of the workshop. But although at times the heat and humidity of Dakar made it hard work, the three weeks allowed for a remarkably deep consideration of a very broad range of issues. This was hugely enriched by the diversity of the participants' national, methodological, and theoretical backgrounds, and by the breadth

of their substantive interests. At times this diversity proved challenging, but the participants were commendably open and eager in their willingness to engage with and learn from each other's approaches. This process was greatly facilitated by the workshop leaders, who did an excellent job of bringing together the varied perspectives, and of encouraging fruitful, lively, and friendly debates across the many different points of view.

The academic conviviality of the workshop was reflected in its social dimension, with the participants enjoying the history, music, and culture of Dakar together while making friends as well as colleagues in the process. In addition to creating an enjoyable atmosphere, this benefit fed back into the workshop's academic life, with the participants showing great enthusiasm in offering constructive comments and suggestions about each other's research during the mini-conference in the final week. For myself, the feedback I received concerning my own research was incredibly useful (and the friendly atmosphere in which it was delivered made the prospect of presenting my research in French far less daunting than it would otherwise have been!).

My experience at the workshop was both rewarding and enjoyable, and I am very grateful to all of the workshop's organizers, leaders, and participants for making it so.