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time, as sub-Saharan Africa is bogged down with too many crises, further exacerbated by the AIDS epidemic. While Englebert’s solution might not solve all of Africa’s problems, it should serve as a catalyst for further studies on both a local and a continental level, and also on the part of the World Bank, the IMF, and Western development agencies that design programs for African states. It is a must read for all Africans who seek a better continent, for students of African politics, decision-makers, and development specialists of all genres.

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Professor and chair of politics and international affairs at Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School, author of numerous studies on the political economy of African states (notably Ghana and Zimbabwe), Jeffrey Herbst comes to us with impeccable Africanist credentials. In what is arguably his most mature, comprehensive, and ambitious work to date, Herbst analyzes the problems of state creation and consolidation in Africa over the last hundred years, from the precolonial to the postindependence eras. In a way, this bold attempt at developing a new approach to the study of African states and politics picks up where others such as Bayart and associates, Chabal and Daloz, and Mamdani leave off, but, strangely, these scholars are never mentioned.

Starting from the assumption that “states are only viable if they are able to control the territory defined by their borders” (3), and following Harry Eckstein, Herbst develops “an analytic perspective that allows the African experience to be understood in comparative perspective” (6). Taking a longue durée perspective à la Fernand Braudel, making “huge comparisons” à la Charles Tilly (i.e., examining broad continuities over space and time), and transcending the traditional division between comparative politics and international relations, the author aims at nothing less than bringing sub-Saharan Africa into the political science mainstream. In a nutshell, Herbst’s argument is that the fundamental problem confronting leaders of African states is “how to broadcast power over sparsely settled lands” (5). More specifically, “African leaders across time and space have faced certain similar issues when trying to rule and have often come to similar conclusions on how to solve the problems they have faced . . . . The fundamental problem facing state-builders in Africa . . . has been to project authority over inhospitable territories that contain relatively low densities of people” (5,
In this regard, the African experience of state-building is in dramatic contrast to the European one, where “the growth of states was closely correlated with the development of significant urban areas” (14).

Using a political geography (or geopolitical) approach, Herbst then goes on to identify three general categories of sub-Saharan African countries based on size and territorial population distribution. The first category, that of states with difficult geographies, is characterized by a scattered population over a large territory (e.g., Angola, Congo-Kinshasa, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sudan, and Tanzania). The second category (“hinterland countries”), is characterized by areas of high and medium population density in relatively small areas of the country, and vast hinterlands where few people live (e.g., Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger). In the third category, that of countries with favorable geographies, the highest concentration of power is found in one area (usually around the capital), and population densities decrease as distance from the capital increases (e.g., Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Guinea, and Zimbabwe). Herbst concludes that because the strategic and economic environments are so different from those of Europe, “the traditional bias in favor of large states is irrelevant to Africa” and that “small size is an advantage given the particular challenges faced by African countries” (170–71). In other words, “a large size is not advantageous to solving domestic political problems” because “it is more difficult to exercise authority over more than fewer groups” (171).

Jeffrey Herbst must be commended for his boldness and ambition in tackling the complex and vexing issue of state power and political leadership in sub-Saharan Africa in such a broadly historical and comparative perspective. Yet having set such ambitious goals for himself, the author was inevitably bound to fail. This he does on several counts. The first major problem is one of erroneous historical interpretation of European imperialism and colonialism in Africa. Rewriting this history in complete contradiction to the available record and evidence, the author argues that during the “scramble for Africa” of the mid-1880s, the major European powers (Britain, France, and Germany) had limited ambitions for territorial control, a late and limited interest in Africa, no significant economic interests, and exhibited little rivalry and competition among themselves (61–73). Starting from the unbelievable observation that “most territory in Africa was not actually physically conquered but ceded more or less legitimately by African rulers” (72), Herbst comes to the astounding conclusions that the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 “had little immediate effect on politics in most of Africa” (76) and that “the common assertion that Africa’s boundaries are meaningless because they are arbitrary is wrong” (94), both of which are definitely not borne out by subsequent political developments. Similarly the author argues, against all evidence, that the European powers had only “extremely limited [colonial] interest” and “limited economic interests” in their African colonies (91).
Linked to this is the author’s woeful ignorance of indigenous (or pre-colonial) African political history and oral tradition and sources. For one thing, the author’s few and superficial historical reference points are limited to what historians of Africa call late state formation (i.e., occurring in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), such as the Ashanti Empire, the Fanti Confederation, the Yoruba kingdom, and the Zulu empire. Beyond a passing reference to Mali and Kanem-Bornu, more ancient Western and Central African state formations such as the Ghana-Soninke kingdom (eighth–twelfth centuries), the Songhay empire (fifteenth–sixteenth centuries), or the Kongo kingdom (twelfth–seventeenth centuries) are totally ignored.

Equally problematic is the fact that Herbst conveniently excludes from the scope of his analysis precisely those countries that would have contradicted his dubious hypothesis, namely North African countries—which he sees incorrectly as having “radically different precolonial and colonial histories” (5; see Ibn Battûta and Ibn Khaldûn for a totally different view)—and South Africa. This considerably diminishes the validity of the author’s contention that geography permanently condemns African states to marginalization, as well as his conclusion that small is better for Africa. If the trend toward ever closer and broader economic and political integration within the European Union is any indication, the African states are fully justified in solemnly proclaiming the advent of an African Union, as they did at the Sirte OAU (Organization of African Unity) summit meeting of March 1–2, 2001, thus resolutely moving (via subregional integration) toward larger (not smaller) geopolitical entities. Furthermore, Herbst’s largely unfavorable comparative analysis of African and European state-building tends to overemphasize the role of raw power, conflict, and war in Africa while minimizing such factors (well analyzed by Charles Tilly) in the European context. Ultimately this line of reasoning takes us back to the hackneyed “unilinear evolutionism” of modernization theory, according to which the salvation of Africa lies in faithfully following the Western path of political and economic development.

One is thus left after reading this book with a sense of profound uneasiness and frustration. Herbst’s subliminal message is that because of geography, population, and lack of effective territorial control, African states are merely juridical and fictitious states (or quasi-states). Reminiscent of arguments made in bygone eras by Montesquieu (who established a close relationship between geography and politics), Darwin (who used geography to justify notions of white supremacy), or more recently, Ricardo Hausmann (who argues that tropical, land-locked countries may never enjoy access to the markets and new technologies they need to flourish in the global economy), the author—who conveniently ignores Africa’s tremendous mineral wealth—erroneously concludes that because of their geographical location, size, and population, African countries are destined to remain forever poor, weak, undeveloped, and dependent. Far from
Among the massive academic production on African democracy and development of the last decade, one very rarely finds a work that fundamentally questions the dominant paradigm, boldly challenges prevailing orthodoxy, and quietly disturbs the status quo. Both the late Claude Ake’s seminal *Democracy and Development in Africa* (Brookings Institution, 1996) and Rita Abrahamsen’s *Disciplining Democracy* fall into that category.

A lecturer in international politics at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, Rita Abrahamsen takes a postmodernist approach inspired by the works of Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and Robert Cox to challenge conventional explanations of democratization in sub-Saharan Africa—particularly the relegation of external factors to secondary importance—and to show how development discourse has constructed the Third World as underdeveloped, thereby legitimizing the right of the North to control and develop the South. Thus, she argues, “the good governance discourse is merely the latest reproduction of the ‘dream of development,’ and similarly entitles the North to develop and democratize the South in its image…. Development discourse… emerges as crucial to an understanding of recent transitions to multi-party politics in Africa” (xi). Abrahamsen further shows how the good governance discourse used by the Bretton Woods institutions (IMF and World Bank), notably the instrumental interpretation of the concept of “popular empowerment,” fuses democracy and economic liberalism into an essentially Western image of the good society reminiscent of modernization theory.

As a consequence, she argues, this good governance discourse serves to legitimize a minimalist form of liberal democracy based on civil and political rights, while delegitimizing and marginalizing alternative conceptualizations based on popular participation and the promotion of the social and economic rights of the poor. Abrahamsen also demonstrates how the newly elected African governments of the new democratic era are facing two irreconcilable constituencies: external donors and creditors and their poor domestic majorities. While these governments are crucially dependent on the first for financial survival and on the second for reelection, they cannot possibly satisfy both at the same time. Having chosen to satisfy