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Africa: Modernity without Development?

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Debate

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Events in Africa over the last two decades have puzzled many. Worsening poverty, corruption, as well as the repeated occurrence of coups or extreme civil violence, all conspire to give a cheerless, if not downright frightening, image of the continent. Are the causes of this crisis to be found in Africa's place in the world economy or in the continual disorder which afflicts the continent? Is the present turmoil a temporary setback or has it become a permanent condition? Why is there such breakdown of society? Will the present efforts for democratization ensure an improvement in the living conditions of the vast majority or merely benefit the elites? Has the continent been 'left behind by the rest of the world', as some have argued? Taken together, these issues raise the more general question of modernization.

The chief challenge facing the analyst of contemporary Africa is to explain how the continent can be both 'modern' and undeveloped – that is, what modernization might mean in a context where there is no development as is normally understood in the West. What we observe in Africa is paradoxical from this point of view: nowhere else is the juxtaposition of the obviously 'traditional' with the patently 'modern' more striking. Africans are not slow in adopting the latest technological aids, com-

dividual freedoms is less than impressive. What is perplexing about Africa is the extent to which, unlike most of the rest of the world, it fails on both counts. In such conditions does it make sense to claim that Africa is 'modern'?

I do not approach the question of modernization from a normative or teleological perspective – seeking to explain why Africa has not followed the same path as other parts of the world. I want instead to make sense of what is happening on the continent from the viewpoint of the logic of those concerned. If Africans believe that being 'modern' is compatible with being 'traditional', then we must understand not just what this means but precisely how it is possible. In so doing, we might well be called upon to consider the possibility that there are different types of modernity – though they might not all be endowed with the same potential for scientific and economic development. My concern is thus not to dispute existing notions of modernity but merely to assess the texture of Africa's own path towards modernization.

Modernity, as I see it, is a dynamic process rather than a state of equilibrium. As such, it is pointless to deem one part of the world categorically 'modern' and another irredeemably 'traditional'. They are simply 'modern' and 'traditional' in different ways. What it is important to distinguish is the instrumental quality of distinct types of modernity. Western modernization has been uniquely effective in combining science and technology with bureaucratic and managerial efficiency, thus establishing the benchmark for what is commonly labelled 'modern' society. East Asia seems today to be in the process of developing its own type of modernity, based on an equally impressive admixture of engineering sophistication, business acumen and organizational capability.

What is noteworthy about Africa is that modernization has not engendered the same forward movement, in terms of economic progress, as in Europe, America or the Far East. The continent appears to have evolved a form of modernity which provides for the ability both to utilize the implements (technological and scientific) of Westernization and to remain obdurately 'traditional' in what we would qualify broadly as social and cultural terms. What is more, there is scarcely any evidence that the use of 'modern' technological instruments has made Westernization more likely. The reverse seems to be true – as though Western modernity was being Africanized.²

Politics in Africa

This approach helps us to understand a world in which politics, for example, is driven by considerations that range from the most decidedly contemporary to the most obviously archaic.³ What it makes clear is that, far from behaving randomly or irrationally, African political actors make sound and shrewd instrumental use of the different registers upon which they can legitimately draw. Two complementary logics bind the 'modern' and 'traditional' in Africa today.

The first consists in what can be called the re-Africanization of Western concepts or customs according to local socio-cultural norms.⁴ This has led to a re-shaping of Western political institutions and political actions by more informal and personalized (infra-institutional) African codes of practice. Nevertheless, an interpretation of African politics based simply on a notion of the hybridization of Western norms is misleading, unless it is made clear that the graft did not have the intended results.⁵ To pursue the biological analogy, African genes proved dominant while the imported European ones turned out to be recessive. It is for this reason that, as argued in *Africa Works*, the realm of politics in Africa is very largely informal.

The second centres on the ways in which Africans operate simultaneously on what can be described as different, and largely discrete, registers. What is meant here is that Africa's political modernity is characterized by a combination of attitudes and habits which draw from a singular fusion of what we would identify as 'modern' or 'traditional' rationalities. Understanding politics in Africa, therefore, is to understand the ever-changing recourse to the logic of different rational registers – and thereby to realize the extent to which it is profitable to operate within such a range of 'modern' and 'traditional' approaches. Thus, for example, the resort to ethnicity may appear to us to be 'traditional' or even backward, but the ways in which elites employ such an instrument must also be seen as a 'modern' face of African politics. Ethnicity is, in this way, both 'modern' and 'traditional', part of the modernity of the continent.⁶

In the West, societies are organized, regulated and run on principles of instrumental modernity which brook very little dissent. The realm of the 'traditional' is very largely left to individual preferences, desires and beliefs. The 'modern' and 'traditional' do not have the same status. Westerners behave in society on the assumption that they are all in agreement with the rules of modernity which govern their lives. The 'traditional' has no legitimacy in this respect and it is of limited practical use in their professional environment. The same is broadly true of the Far East where, cultural differences notwithstanding, societies are similarly regulated.⁷ An appeal to ethnicity, to pursue the same example, is not considered politically legitimate.

This is not the case in Africa. My point is that on the continent, it is both legitimate and advantageous to operate according to different logics of modernity and tradition in all areas of life and work. It is thus not a question of Africans being more 'traditional' (meaning backward) than others. Rather it is the much more pertinent fact that being both 'traditional' and 'modern' is at once justifiable and instrumentally profitable. Having recourse to 'modern' and 'traditional' rationalities, as discussed above, is the norm rather than the exception: it is the reality which any framework of analysis must take into account. We thus need to conceptualize Africa's modernization as embodying a constantly evolving dynamic of appar-

ently disconnected, though in reality overlapping, registers.

Understanding 'disorder'

Such an analytical framework makes it clear why Africa's present modernity encourages the creative use of the 'traditional'. To speak of the 'traditional' in this way, however, is not to imply that this approach is culturalist. Although careful attention is given to the political significance of culture, I do not in any way maintain that politics in Africa is to be explained solely in cultural terms. My argument is that cultural dynamics, which are most often subsumed under the label of 'tradition', need also to be examined from their 'modern' instrumental perspective. Cultural factors are no more and no less significant in Africa than they are elsewhere. What is important to analysis is the way in which they are utilized politically in a modern setting.

The paradigm developed in *Africa Works* shows that what is distinct in Africa is the creative manner in which this overlap of 'modernity' and 'tradition' combines to create a form of political accountability which is rooted in the instrumentalization of disorder. By providing a coherent framework for what might otherwise appear merely as chaos or anarchy, we establish the foundations for an analysis of politics in Africa which is open to meaningful comparison. This re-interpretation thus helps to explain how the continent might be modernizing whilst at the same time failing to develop economically in the ways we normally would associate with 'modernity'. ♦

Notes

1. This article has been adapted from ideas presented in my latest book: Patrick Chabal & Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999).
2. To take but one example, an African academic with an American PhD in engineering will not find it inconsistent to defer to the demands of witchcraft in his village.
3. African leaders, for example, may well combine the most modern polling techniques with a consultation of their village ancestors (by way of the local medium).
4. On the concept and implications of political Africanization, see Patrick Chabal, *Power in Africa: an essay in political interpretation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992 & 1994), Chapter 12.
5. See here chiefly Jean-François Bayart, *L'Etat en Afrique: la politique du ventre* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).
6. See here John Lonsdale, 'Ethnicité morale et tribalisme politique', *Politique Africaine*, 61, March 1996.
7. Though it is fair to say that, since our notion of the modern is very largely determined by the experience of the West, it is difficult at this stage to know precisely in which ways Asian modernity will eventually differ from that of the West.

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PHOTO: ROEL BURGER

puters or mobile phones, but at the same time they seem locked into what outsiders all too readily tend to see as 'backward' social or psychological conventions – such as ethnicity or witchcraft. Above all, their governments seem unable, or unwilling, to devise and implement policies favouring sustained economic growth. There is no development, as it is commonly understood in the West.

What is modernization?

The common assumption of existing paradigms in the social sciences is that modernization is the coherent outcome of the combined and self-reinforcing effects of social and economic development as we have experienced them in the West. This is another way of saying that modernization is perceived as the form of development which makes it possible to evolve an economically dynamic, technologically sophisticated and politically open society. It is accepted that non-Western societies may have different cultural attributes. However, so long as they meet the two criteria of economic success and technological advance, they are considered to have modernized – even if, as in some contemporary Asian societies, their record on human rights and in-