



# Political Science and African Political Epistemologies: The Dialectics of Developmentalist vs. Emancipatory Approaches

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## Abstract

The premise of this article is that there has been a dialectical duality to the political science study of Africa, in terms of scholars and focus. The duality of scholars is represented by African scholars both on the continent and in the diaspora, on one hand, and Africanist scholars (non-African scholars who study Africa), on the other. Much of the political study of Africa has focused on the problematic of development. This political science research focus on the problematic of development gives epistemological priority to generating empirical political knowledge research. In contrast, research emphasis on the problematic of emancipation from oppression and exploitation prioritises an epistemological conception of knowledge that facilitates radical change as it grapples with evaluative moral-ethical issues. The purpose of the article is to examine the dialectical nexus of development- and emancipatory-focused political study of Africa, and the impact and relevance of the corpus of political science epistemologies thus generated. The central argument is that the relevance and implications of political science epistemologies generated via normative and critical approaches have been more profound than those generated via strictly positivist and empirical approaches.

## Résumé

Cet article part du principe qu'il existe une dualité dialectique dans l'étude de l'Afrique en sciences politiques, tant du point de vue des chercheurs que des objectifs poursuivis. La dualité des chercheurs est représentée par les chercheurs africains sur le continent et dans la diaspora, d'une part, et les chercheurs africanistes (chercheurs non africains qui étudient l'Afrique), d'autre part. Une grande partie de l'étude politique de l'Afrique s'est

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concentrée sur la problématique du développement. L'accent mis par cette recherche en sciences politiques sur la problématique du développement donne la priorité épistémologique à la production de connaissances politiques empiriques. En revanche, l'accent mis par la recherche sur la problématique de l'émancipation, de l'oppression et de l'exploitation donne la priorité à une conception épistémologique de la connaissance qui facilite un changement radical en s'attaquant à des questions évaluatives. L'objectif de cet article est d'examiner le lien dialectique entre la recherche axée sur le développement et la recherche axée sur l'émancipation dans l'étude politique de l'Afrique, ainsi que l'impact et la pertinence du corpus d'épistémologies des sciences politiques qui en découle. L'argument central est que la pertinence et les implications des épistémologies des sciences politiques générées par des approches normatives et critiques ont été plus profondes que celles générées par des approches strictement positivistes et empiriques.

## **Introduction**

The main focus of much political science research in and on Africa has been the problematic of development in its social, economic and political trajectories. Yet, the process of development has largely taken place within a context of political, economic and cultural oppression. Focus on the problematic of development gives epistemological priority to positivist approaches that are assumed to facilitate the generation of empirical political knowledge. However, research emphasis on the problematic of emancipation from oppression and exploitation calls for normative political epistemologies that are rooted in interpretivist or hermeneutic theoretical approaches, which prioritise an epistemological conception of knowledge that facilitates grappling with evaluative issues, such as the purposes of African governments, the nature of African regimes, the goals of their political actions and the moral-ethical foundations of African states.

This article explores the nexus of these two broad political science approaches to the study of African politics and the impact and relevance of the corpus of knowledge generated in this way. The article begins with a broad survey of the developmentalist theoretical and conceptual approaches to the study of African politics in the liberal research tradition. This is followed by a focus on the emancipatory theoretical approaches that are essentially critical in orientation. Finally, the article examines the efficacy of the dialectical method in the study of African politics.

The article's objective is to evaluate the relevance and impact of these approaches in terms of their analytical and explanatory potency. It concludes with a brief evaluation of the positivist vs. interpretivist theoretical

approaches and their impact and implications. The main argument of the article is that the relevance and impact of normative political science epistemologies generated via interpretivist/hermeneutic theoretical lenses have been more profound than political science epistemologies generated via strictly positivist-empiricist approaches. The former epistemologies tend to be transformational in their intent and implications whereas the latter tend to be conservative and, ipso facto, pro status quo.

### **Developmentalist Liberal Approaches**

The 1960s were a landmark decade in the political development of the African continent. This was the decade when the majority of African countries achieved their political independence from colonialism. From that point, the political science approach to the study of Africa was dominated by developmentalist liberal theories. Their key assumption was that African countries would develop along the same lines of political and economic development as the Western industrial liberal democracies. Among the most prominent theories in this developmentalist liberal tradition were modernisation theory, political order approaches and public policy analysis perspectives. To evaluate the relevance and impact of these theories in terms of their analytical and explanatory potency, let us focus on each one separately.

#### ***Modernisation Theory: The 1960s to the early 1970s***

Modernisation theory is based on Walt Rostow's (1960) exposition of the stages of economic growth. All political systems, according to Rostow, develop through the same five stages of growth as leaders strive to transform 'backward' agricultural societies into 'modern' industrial economies. The five stages are:

1. Traditional—characterised by subsistence, barter trade and agriculture, and dependent on a rural economy.
2. Transitional—characterised by specialisation, surpluses and infrastructure, and dependent on the social appreciation of education and skills development.
3. Take off—characterised by industrialisation, growing investment, regional growth and political change, and dependent on a sub-urban economy.
4. Drive to Maturity—characterised by diversification, innovation, investment and less reliance on imports, and dependent on growth and developed economies.

5. High Mass Consumption—characterised by consumer orientation, the flourishing of durable goods and the dominance of the service sector, and dependent on a global economy or ‘market managing’ economies.

Emerging in the 1960s, the theory assumed that at the time of independence Africa was at the beginning point of a process of development that would enhance education and literacy, mechanise agriculture, industrialise urban centres and facilitate economic growth measured in Gross National Product (GNP) terms. The social trajectory of modernisation theory borrowed heavily from the ideas of Max Weber (1930) and Talcott Parsons (1967, 1951, 1937) in the fields of psychology and sociology. The main concern here was with the social dynamics by which individuals shifted from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’ world views. Modernisation theory viewed ethnic divisions in Africa as obstacles to development and assumed that these would fade away as modernising societies became ‘melting pots’ in the image of the Western world (Nasong’o 2019:33–40, 2008:21; Schraeder 2004:303; Rostow 1960). At the political level, modernisation theory held that the key to political development was a rapidly growing electorate both willing and able to participate in the political process. As political participation grew, it was expected to generate corresponding growth and the specialisation of government agencies as leaders responded to the legitimate demands of citizens. It was envisaged that the economic, social and political trajectories of modernisation would culminate in the establishment of modern industrial democracies in Africa.

As argued elsewhere (Nasong’o 2018:35–56, 2008:19–44), however, modernisation theory was based on shaky assumptions. First was the a priori assumption that ethnic identity is, in and of itself, a hindrance to development, however defined, whereas industrialisation is the ideal end of a modern political economy (Schraeder 2004: 303; Almond and Coleman 1960). Second was the assumption that modernisation was a unilinear process in which traditional attributes like ethnic affiliations would ultimately erode away to be replaced by modern forms of affiliation to civic and professional associations. The reality, however, is that ethnicity and other forms of ordering societies, including clan and caste systems, are often revitalised and strengthened by the modernisation process. Third was the assumption that the modernisation process was a zero-sum game in which certain social and political advances along the modernity scale would inevitably result in an equal decline in traditional culture and values. On the contrary, it is apparent that traditional institutions often adapt to and co-exist with modern institutions. Whitaker Jr. (1970) demonstrated this with particular clarity in the case of northern Nigeria, where the creation

and expansion of modern political institutions was accompanied by the strengthening of the political roles played by traditional Muslim leaders (emirs). 'Far from modern institutions having simply driven out traditional ones, elements of the institutions of each type or origin coalesced to form a workable system of power and authority' (Whitaker Jr. 1970:460).

Fourth, and finally, modernisation theory assumed that traditional attitudes and institutions are inherently irrational and thus a hindrance to modernisation or development. On the contrary, modernisation revisionists such as Whitaker Jr. (1970) emphasised the importance of building on traditional cultures and values to promote development in Africa. To disregard the significance of such traditional attributes as ethnic affiliations and beliefs, they argued, is to court failure. Indeed, historically, ethnicity provided the basis for the organisation of resistance against colonial rule; it was a basis for adaptation to the uncertainties and insecurities caused by the rapid changes introduced by colonialism, and for the mobilisation of the nationalist struggle for political independence. In more contemporary terms, ethnicity functions to cushion the individual against the deleterious effects of alienation inherent in the rapidly modernising societies of Africa, by providing a sense of belonging and appreciation of one's social roots in a community. Even more importantly, ethnic movements demand justice and equity in the political and resource dispensation of the moment and thus effectively contribute to democratic practice (Nasong'o 2008:24, 2005:97; Nnoli 1998; Nyangira 1987).

Despite its noted limitations, modernisation theory had the impact of facilitating easy advice to African governments on how best to speed up the process of moving up the stages of growth. In doing so, it also justified considerable increase in the allocation of government funds, especially aid money, to social scientists, especially those working in the 'development' sector. Nevertheless, given that the theory drew from the experiences of individual Western states and sought to extrapolate these experiences to the rest, it can be said to amount to atomistic fallacy.

### ***Political order approaches: the late 1960s to the late 1970s***

The political study of Africa took a major shift, beginning in the mid-1970s, from the optimistic assumptions of modernisation theorists to a pessimistic view of African politics. This was occasioned by a number of developments in Africa and the US starting in the mid-1960s. First was the rise of secessionist movements and guerrilla insurgencies, which led to frequent military coups—an average of four successful coups annually between 1965 and 1969, compared to only two successful ones before

1963. This violent trend debunked the belief in democratic power transfer associated with the modernisation theorists. Second was the intensification of the Cold War and the commitment of the US to contain the spread of Communism into Africa via means that were anathema to the optimistic assumptions of modernisation theory.

When the normative goal of modernisation theory, the creation of democratic political systems, clashed with anticommunist national security interests, U.S. leaders often supported national security efforts even when it meant creating unsavory, undemocratic leaders in Africa and other portions of the developing world (Schraeder 2004:308).

Third was the politics of the civil rights movement in the US and its potential for violence as well as the protests against US involvement in Vietnam, both of which led to the mantra of 'law and order' as the political slogan for presidential campaigns in the US, beginning in 1964.

The impact of these three political developments resulted in a shift away from modernisation theory and its belief in benign political development to a pessimistic expectation of 'political decay' in Africa manifested in 'conflict and chaos'. The foremost exponent of this perspective was Huntington (1968), according to whom the modernisation process, instead of contributing to democracy and stability, engendered political instability that endangered US foreign policy interests. It was now contended that democracy was not necessarily a natural or direct end-product of modernisation; that modernising states face six major crises, which, if not dealt with, threaten regime collapse and political decay. The crises were identified as:

1. *The crisis of identity* embodied in the challenge of crafting a common sense of nationality among ethnically, linguistically and religiously disparate peoples.
2. *The crisis of legitimacy* encapsulated in the challenge of creating a broad-based national consensus on the legitimate exercise of political authority.
3. *The crisis of participation* represented by the challenging quest to guide rising public demands for effective inclusion in the decision-making process.
4. *The crisis of penetration* symbolised by the difficulty in creating an effective government presence throughout the national territory.
5. *The crisis of distribution*, which hinged on the quest for balancing public demands for goods and services with the government's responsibility and capacity to provide public goods.
6. *The crisis of integration* embodied by the onerous task of nurturing harmonious relationships among a society's multiple groups and interests who were vying for access to and control of the political process (Nasong'o 2008:26–27; Schraeder 2004:309; Huntington 1965, 1968; Anber 1967).

Faced with criticism of their overly internalist approach and lack of attention to the external forces that African political systems faced, political order theorists added two more crises to the above: *the crisis of national survival*, that is, the challenge of maintaining the territorial integrity of the country as constituted at independence; and *the crisis of foreign control*, i.e., the challenge of securing and protecting political, social and economic freedom from external control (Rothchild and Curry Jr. 1979).

Political order theorists prescribed political institutionalisation as the remedy to these crises. By this they meant the creation of strong governmental structures capable of maintaining political order and stability. Such institutionalisation had to be the top priority of African leaders. Paradoxically, this perspective was the antithesis of the modernisationist approach. Instead of the rising levels of popular political participation envisaged by the latter, the former gave African leaders the licence to curtail popular participation in the name of securing stability and order. Huntington (1968:7), for instance, argued that the most critical political difference among countries was not their *form* of government but their *degree* of government. He admired the Leninist vanguard single party, arguing that though such single parties might not provide liberty, they provided authority and created governments that actually governed. Zolberg (1966) went so far as to argue, in the case of West Africa, that the single-party system provided political order, the prerequisite for the successful modernisation of African societies. This political order perspective provided African leaders with a sound intellectual rationalisation for the establishment of authoritarian single-party states, which were viewed as the most viable political rubric for the onerous task of nation-building and economic development (Nasong'o 2005:7–16; Nyong'o 1992a:90–96).

### ***Public policy process perspectives: the late 1970s to the 1980s***

In the mid-1970s critiques emerged to the effect that much of the political science scholarship on Africa was too abstract to be of any practical relevance in addressing the day-to-day policy problems faced by Africans. Scholars were urged to descend from their lofty grand theorising and make their research more policy-relevant. This led to the emergence of two trajectories of public policy research, which drew from political science and economics. First was the political economy approach, whose main assumption was that politics and economics are so mutually interrelated that previous attempts to study each in isolation from the other offered solutions that did not capture real world conditions (Schraeder 2004). This approach appropriated rational choice models from economics, the

essential thesis of which is that individuals are rational actors who make decisions on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis of the trade-offs between a variety of options. As rational actors, they seek to maximise utility and minimise cost. Schraeder (2004: 312) notes that the political component of this approach emphasises the importance of understanding the variety of policy alternatives available to policy-makers and other interests in society as they bargain for an outcome that they perceive to be in their best interests. Bates (1981) applied this approach to explain why food production declined in Africa in the first decades of independence and contributed to vicious cycles of famine and starvation. In other words, why should reasonable leaders adopt public policies that have harmful consequences for the societies they govern? The answer, according to Bates, lay in the political calculations of African policy-makers.

The second trajectory of the public policy process perspective focused on public policy analysis. This entailed evaluating the outputs of government policies and programmes. The approach probed and explored the strategies available to policy-makers for addressing the social, economic and political problems that characterised the quest for development, broadly defined. The approach was action-oriented and aimed at problem-solving. Its main concern was to analyse policy options available to policy-makers and evaluate which one of them was most germane to the development process. Taking this problem-solving approach with a view to assisting African leaders in tackling the constraints presented by inherited colonial institutions, resource scarcity and environmental degradation, Rothchild and Curry Jr. (1979) contended that African leaders were capable of adopting policy options from a variety of strategies, each of which encompassed different trade-offs, depending on the nature of the policy goals desired by the political leaders.

Schraeder (2004) points out that the impetus for the shift towards public policy perspectives, beginning in the late 1970s and continuing through to the 1980s, was an increasing emphasis on the role of the state in Africa. Scholars began to effectively interrogate the relationship between the state and its domestic constituencies, including ethno-regional groups, social movements and classes, as well as the relationship between the state and external forces, such as transnational corporations, international organisations and agents of bilateral and multilateral interests. Hence, by the end of the 1980s, the state had become the focal analytical point for African and Africanist political scientists who were seeking to understand and explain the 'lost decades' of Africa's political independence (Nyong'o 1989, 1992; Migdal 1988; Rothchild and Chazan 1988; Rothchild and Olorunsola 1983; Curry Jr. 1979).

### *Neoliberal theoretical eclecticism: the mid-1990s to the 2010s*

The end of the Cold War and the disintegration of socialist experiments in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia marked a new era dominated by neoliberal ideas. It saw a shift within the liberal political science tradition in theorising about politics in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world. The liberal tradition was now marked by a new theoretical and conceptual eclecticism. The first was the study of democratisation, inspired by the so-called second liberation of Africa (Lindberg 2006; Murunga and Nasong'o 2006; Mbaku and Ihonvbere 2003; Nzongola-Ntalaja and Lee 1998; Bratton and Van de Walle 1997; Nyong'o 1987). These scholars shared with modernisation theorists the optimism of democratic consolidation in Africa. However, they did not assume a priori that such consolidation would be easy or even assured.

The second trend in the liberal tradition, which is a corollary to the first one, focused on the centrality of civil society in the politics of democratisation in Africa. The first crop of scholars who took this approach heralded civil society, defined in terms of social formations such as trade unions, professional associations, community organisations, women's organisations and religious groups among others, as the hitherto missing key to sustained political reform and insurance of political renewal on the continent (Harbeson, Rothchild and Chazan 1994; Kleinberg and Clark 2000). Subsequent scholars in this trajectory took a more critical position, arguing that in spite of civil society's critical role in pushing authoritarian regimes to open up political space to competition, its democratic predisposition could not be taken for granted, as organisations within the realm of civil society exhibit contradictory possibilities (Nasong'o 2004, 2007; Murunga 2000; Callaghy 1994).

A focus on the role of ethnicity in African politics constitutes the third trend in the current liberal tradition. Herein, some scholars contend that the resurgence of ethnic conflicts in Africa was inevitable after the end of the Cold War and that these conflicts constitute the bane of African political development. Other scholars posit that the ethnicisation of politics is inherently positive, as it both engenders and calls for the decentralisation of authority from the contested national centre to the local levels, hence promoting a democratic ethos (Adar 1998; Nnoli 1998; Rothchild 1997; Glickman 1995).

Fourth is the gender approach to the study of African politics. Scholars who take this approach argue that the classic themes of African politics need to be enriched by focusing on women, hitherto marginalised, whose

empowerment has yielded more of their numbers in the political arena with serious implications for the nature of political discourse and policy formulation in Africa (Nasong'o and Ayot 2007; Oyewumi 2005; Boko, Balamoune-Lutz and Kimuna 2005; Tamale 1999).

The fifth new trend in the liberal study of Africa adopts an individualistic methodology and focuses on the actions of individual African leaders as the critical variable in seeking to understand the continent's socioeconomic problems. This approach tends to be extreme in its pessimism about the nature of African politics. The basic logic herein is that African political classes manipulate the state to pursue illegal activities with the sole purpose of self-aggrandisement. Scholars such as Bayart, Ellis and Hibou (1998), for instance, argue that African political elites deliberately perpetrate political disorder and even instigate state collapse in pursuit of political advantage and personal enrichment. Chabal and Daloz (1998:162) go so far as to posit that African political systems embody an inbuilt bias in favour of greater disorder. Although Van de Walle (2001) follows this trend in his explanation of Africa's socioeconomic malaise, in terms of the patrimonial logic of governance that he views as incompatible with economic growth and development, he is more guarded in his analysis. Unlike Chabal and Daloz, Van de Walle contends that the African crisis of governance is neither static nor permanent, nor is it part of the natural landscape of African politics and society, as Bayart et al. suggest. It is, rather, subject to both internal and external forces of change, including the forces of democratisation (Van de Walle 2001).

The sixth and final trend focuses on 'worst-case scenarios' of state collapse in Africa. With Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Congo-Kinshasa as its points of analysis, this approach explores the ability of warlords to use their control of valuable resources—including diamonds and gold—as a source of income to fund illicit activities, especially guerrilla wars against the centralised state authority. Taking this approach, Reno (1998, 1995) notes that historically, external actors—particularly transnational corporations—have shown themselves to be more than willing to enter into financial arrangements with warlords as long as the said warlords control access to a valued resource or territory. Schraeder (2004:317) points out, however, that critics have cautioned that one must be wary of attempts to generalise from Reno's worst-case scenarios to the broader universe of the continent's states, because for every extreme case of state collapse, such as Somalia, there exist other cases of effective conflict resolution and state-building, such as Mozambique (Manning 2002).

The state of the liberal tradition in the social study of Africa in the twenty-first century is thus characterised by a lack of unanimity on the specifics of which liberal theories are most apposite for the analysis of African politics and society. As the above six trends amply illustrate, the liberal approach entails myriad competing ideas, theories and policy prescriptions. These differences notwithstanding, scholars in the liberal tradition are bound together by their common belief in the Western liberal democratic tradition as the model to be emulated by African leaders (Schraeder 2004:318).

### **Emancipatory Critical Approaches**

Informed by the momentous experiences of the Western world, developmentalist liberal theories of African politics assumed that African countries could and should replicate the development models of the Western capitalist world. These approaches were overly internalist in outlook, tending to assume that African politics and development were essentially a function of factors internal to African states. On the other hand, critical theories were inspired by the socialist experiments of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, China and Cuba, as well as the social democratic systems of the Nordic countries. Critical perspectives emphasise the deleterious impact of external forces in African politics and contend that genuine development will be achieved in Africa only through emancipatory revolutionary struggles that facilitate the inauguration of socialist and people-centred modes of governance throughout Africa. Among these emancipatory critical perspectives are dependency theory, world systems theory and Marxism.

#### ***Dependency theory: the late 1960s to the early 1970s***

Despite the optimistic projections of modernisation theorists, Africa experienced political authoritarianism, economic stagnation and social strife through the 1970s, 1980s and beyond. Modernisation theorists explained these problems in terms of factors internal to Africa, especially poor governance and corruption. Dependency theorists focused on external factors and argued that the problem of underdevelopment in Africa was a product of the continent's incorporation into the global capitalist system from an unequal footing. This resulted in the extraction of resources from Africa and their transshipment to Europe, hence the progressive underdevelopment of Africa.

According to Rodney ([1972] 1982), before the sixteenth century, African countries were developing economically and politically. However, the spread of international capitalism by the end of the sixteenth century

culminated in colonialism and the incorporation of Africa into the global capitalist system. This marked the end of all forms of autonomous development in Africa. European domination, Rodney argued, resulted in the development of underdevelopment, i.e., the gradual impoverishment of the African continent, as previous development was halted, blunted and reversed (Rodney [1972], 1982; Caporaso 1978; Leys 1975; Cardoso 1977; Frank 1967, 1970, 1972). Instead, under the colonial economy, surplus value was extracted from the colonies and shipped to the colonial metropolises. Substandard wages were paid to African workers, while no profits were reinvested in the colonies in the form of social services to benefit Africans. Profits were instead expatriated to the metropolises, where they contributed to the material wellbeing of Europeans, a process that led to the development of Europe and the underdevelopment of Africa simultaneously (Rodney [1972] 1982:212; Schraeder 2004:324).

From the dependency perspective, governance in postcolonial Africa has less to do with the management of public affairs for the benefit of Africans, but more to do with the maintenance of the unequal relations between the postcolony and the former colonial metropolises. The African political elites constitute a comprador class that advertently or inadvertently serves as the political, economic and cultural agents of global capitalism. According to Dani Nabudere (1977, 1979), transnational corporations constitute the neocolonial form of this type of imperialism. The local comprador class, who manage the subsidiaries of these corporations or sit on their boards, benefit from the survival and success of these businesses and thus influence domestic policy-making to protect these foreign interests. Such policies benefit only the foreigners and their local allies (Frank 1972; Leys 1975). Hence, African governments preside over the impoverishment of local majorities and, as Nyong'o (1989) argues, have to be strong enough to master the tensions and conflicts generated among the masses by this process of underdevelopment. Inevitably, therefore, authoritarianism becomes the established mode of governance in this scheme of things, the process of democratisation notwithstanding.

### ***The world systems approach: the mid-1970s to the 1980s***

The world systems approach emerged in the mid-1970s and focused on the exploitative nature of the relations between the global North and global South. Wallerstein (1976, 1979), the theory's main exponent, analysed the emergence of the capitalist world system, which he saw as an exploitative global capitalist system controlled by the major powers of the West. This

system was characterised by alternating periods of economic boom and bust in which the metropolises progress and the periphery gets impoverished. According to this perspective, European overseas imperialism epitomised by the scramble for Africa was a consequence of the contraction in the capitalist world economy between 1873 and 1897 (Schraeder 2004: 325; Wallerstein 1976; Nabudere 1979). In place of the centre-periphery dyadic approach of the traditional dependency theorists, like Andre Frank (1967) and Fernando Cardoso (1977), Wallerstein conceptualised an intermediate class between the two, the semi-periphery. Countries in the semi-periphery are neither very powerful nor are they overly impoverished. These are states that wield economic and political power within their immediate regions, such as Nigeria in West Africa, Kenya in East Africa and South Africa in the southern African region.

According to the world systems approach, genuine socioeconomic development in Africa can only occur with a shift from the capitalist ethos of the moment to a people-centred socialist form of governance. Otherwise, attempts by any given country to attain socioeconomic transformation within the capitalist world system are doomed to fail. However, the possibility for the overthrow of the capitalist world economy is complicated by the existence of the semi-periphery. The revolution is supposed to be occasioned by extreme polarisation between a small core of the richest countries and the vast majority of the poorest ones. However, semi-periphery countries delay the process of polarisation by undermining the creation of a unified front against the centre countries. Semi-peripheral states see themselves as better off in economic and political terms than the countries of the periphery and thus wittingly or unwittingly serve as agents of the metropolises by seeking to strengthen their position in an otherwise exploitative global system (Amin 1976).

### ***Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches: the late 1970s***

From a materialist perspective, Marx (1992 [1848]) postulated that all societies are divided into two basic classes bound together in a relationship of exploitation. The dominant classes in a capitalist society are the bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production) and the dominated are the proletariat (the working class who sell their labour for subsistence). As more and more profits accrue to the bourgeoisie, the proletariat becomes more and more alienated from the products of their labour and they increasingly become revolutionised. The revolutionary situation is accelerated by advances in the forces of production (technological, scientific, etc.), which outgrow the relations of production (the system of property ownership among classes),

resulting in increasing difficulty for the dominant class to maintain control over society via its traditional means. Since no dominant class is willing to peacefully cede its position of dominance, the growing contradiction between the forces of production and relations of production results in an intensified struggle that culminates in the revolutionary overthrow of the ruling class. According to Marx, this is the essence of dialectical materialism, which has characterised the development of human society from the ancient to the feudal to the contemporary capitalist system, which will eventually transition into the socialist and communist systems as the end product of social development. In this Marxian conception, the established order is the thesis, the contradictions it generates constitute the antithesis and the revolutionary outcome is the synthesis (Marx [1848] 1992).

Drawing from the principles of classical Marxism, neo-Marxism emerged in the late 1970s and affected critical theory on Africa. First, whereas neo-Marxism concurred with dependency theorists that capitalism is inherently exploitative, neo-Marxists contended that individual African countries could achieve 'dependent development' within the capitalist world economy by pursuing autocentric (self-reliant) development (Amin 1990). Neo-Marxists rejected the dependency theory's contention that only one mode of production—capitalism—characterised the international political economy. They posited that the fundamental socioeconomic differences that existed both between and within African economies pointed to the simultaneous existence of both capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production at the international, regional, national and even sub-national levels (Schraeder 2004:330; Amin 1990). Neo-Marxists thus preferred a more nuanced approach that took into account myriad developmental processes and results globally, regionally and nationally. Second, neo-Marxists argued that it was wrong to assume that the spread of capitalism across the globe had had a permanent pernicious effect on Africa. To the contrary, they contended, in line with their classical Marxist precursors, the spread of capitalism to Africa marked a major developmental stage in the inexorable march towards socialism, the ultimate end of sociopolitical development. In line with Wallerstein's postulation (1979), neo-Marxists posited that semi-periphery countries had witnessed rising levels of literacy, urbanisation, agricultural mechanisation and industrial output, all of which constituted the requisite conditions for the crystallisation of a proletariat, the class charged with leading the revolutionary struggle for the overthrow of capitalism and the realisation of a classless society characterised by the equality of all.

In matters of governance and development in Africa, the key issue between Marxists and neo-Marxists was whether the African state merely mirrored the interests of the dominant class in each African country (the viewpoint of classical Marxism) or whether African governing classes could be independent and implement policies that ran counter to the interests of the dominant national economic class (the standpoint of neo-Marxists). According to Schraeder (2004), the most notable contribution to this debate, at least in Africanist circles, was made by Richard Sklar (1978), who contended that, fundamentally, class relations are determined by relations of power not relations of production, as classical Marxists presumed. Central to Sklar's thesis was the argument that the African state was not a mere reflection of the society's economic system, nor should it be viewed as a sheer instrument of its dominant classes. Instead, Sklar posited a perception of African politics in terms of class competition with varying degrees of class competition and conflict. In certain circumstances, the economic elite may control the activities of the ruling elite; in other circumstances, the reverse may be the case. The point, according to this approach, is to eschew the notion that one particular class or combination of classes will always be dominant, nationally and internationally, and to focus on the reality of different class configurations and relationships latitudinally and longitudinally in each African country.

### ***New critical trends: the mid-1990s to the 2010s***

In the twenty-first century, following the disintegration of socialist experiments across the globe, a shift occurred in the critical political science tradition just as it did in the liberal tradition. The critical approach largely moved away from prescriptions for the inauguration of socialist modes of governance to the devolution of power to ensure a people-centred mode of governance. In the twentieth century, the Soviet Union had served as an ideological beacon of hope for African Marxists who saw a path to development that was independent of capitalism. Its demise ushered in a period of extreme pessimism among critical scholars (Shaw 1991; Ajulu 1995, 2000). The pessimism engendered a theoretical revisionism that resulted in a number of new research trends and perspectives (Schraeder 2004:333–336).

The first trend is a critical review of the process of democratisation. Focusing on the role of external powers in promoting multiparty democracy in Africa, critical scholars contend that this is a form of neocolonialism that is contributing to the recolonisation of the continent. Claude Ake (1994,

1996) for instance, argues that, for the most part, the adoption of multiparty politics in Africa has contributed to the 'democratisation of disempowerment', in which the essence of electoral contests is the rotation of self-interested elites of different political parties in power while the majority of the citizens remain disempowered from the political system. Ake argues that the true essence of democracy is social democracy, wherein the popular masses are guaranteed concrete social and economic rights beyond the abstract civil and political rights that are the hallmark of liberal democracy (Ake 1994, 1996; Nasong'o and Murunga 2007). Achieving social democracy, according to Sklar (2002), requires the nurturing of 'developmental democracy' in which collective group interests (as opposed to individual self-interest) are protected and promoted, and the pursuit of social justice and the prioritisation of economic rights. Sklar posits that such developmental democracy constitutes the best political option to the prevailing cruel choice between laissez-faire liberalism without social justice on the one hand and authoritarian modes of statist developmentalism on the other.

The second new major trend in the critical political study of Africa is embodied in the political economy approach, which critiques the increasing power and authority of international financial institutions, especially the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, over the economic decision-making of African countries. During the Cold War era, African states enjoyed bargaining leverage in sourcing foreign economic assistance between the West and the East. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, so went this leverage, and IMF/World Bank loans increasingly became tied to the conditionalities of economic liberalisation in the name of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), which were not only rammed down the throats of African leaders, but also required them to use force to implement. SAPs ran counter to the legitimate interests of the masses and, insofar as they were negotiated in closed-door boardrooms and needed force to implement, were inimical to genuine efforts at creating responsive and accountable governance in Africa (Cheru 1989; Mkandawire and Olukoshi 1995; Mkandawire and Soludo 1999; Murunga 2007). Scholars of this research orientation argue the case for Africans to retake the initiative in the SAP debate, otherwise the processes of political democratisation, economic liberalisation and the simultaneous determination of Africa's economic policies by international financial institutions amount to shifting from political dictatorship to authoritarian economism (Nasong'o 2004).

The third critical trend is rooted in the dependency perspective and has two main trajectories—neoimperialism and postimperialism. Neoimperialism proceeds from the premise that the granting of political

independence to African countries did not alter the exploitative military, economic, political and cultural relations between Africa and the capitalist global North in any meaningful way. Taking this view, Lumumba-Kasongo (1999) argues that, indeed, the exploitation of Africa has increased and intensified in the post-Cold War period. The postimperialism perspective, on the other hand, posits that as agents of global North imperialism, transnational corporations can play both negative and positive roles, depending on the nature of the relationship between the international wing of the corporations' managerial bourgeoisie headquartered in global North countries and the local indigenous wing of the same managerial bourgeoisie in African countries. Sklar and Becker (1999) concur that such relations are not ideologically neutral as they transmit the capitalist values of the global North to African countries. They argue, nonetheless, that such transmission of ideas, attitudes and values is not a unilinear but a two-way process: 'Members of the corporate international bourgeoisie are just as likely to be sensitised to the developmental values of their host country partners as the other way round' (cit. in Schraeder 2004:336; Falola 2002:678).

The fourth new trend in the critical tradition focuses on the idea of engendering the social sciences, which means making gender an integral element of the analytical approach to various themes in African politics and society (Schraeder 2004:334; Murunga 2002; Sall 2000). Parpart and Staudt (1990) and Nasong'o and Ayot (2007), for instance, argue that gender is critical to political development in Africa and to all scholarly efforts to conceptualise and theorise the modern African state, whether in its historical origins, current composition or the management of the extraction and distribution of resources. Some scholars in this realm focus on the collaboration between patriarchy and capitalism and the constraining impact of this on the role of women in socioeconomic development. In this regard, April Gordon (1996) argues that, although patriarchy and capitalism once collaborated to control and exploit women, their interests no longer coincide in contemporary Africa and, accordingly, women have the capacity to design new creative strategies to reform existing patriarchal structures and capitalist development to enhance their own status and improve their opportunities. This eventuality, according to Nasong'o and Ayot (2007), is contingent upon the facilitation of a critical mass of women's representation in key policy-making state institutions.

The study of social movements and their contribution to the struggles for more inclusive governance in Africa constitutes the fifth research trend in the critical tradition. The work of Mamdani and Wamba-dia-Wamba (1995) is emblematic of this genre. These authors adopt a broad definition

of social movements to encompass all group activity independent of the state, a perspective that enables them to examine such varied social formations as national liberation movements, religious revivalist movements, ethnonationalist movements and community-based organisations of self-empowerment, among others. The thread that links the myriad movements they examine in their work is a shared experience of past oppression and the perpetual struggle for survival and inclusion in the political process. The potential for the success of these social movements in achieving their objectives, the argument goes, is dependent upon: the types of objectives they set for themselves and the strategies they devise for achieving them; the quality of their leaderships and followers; as well as the nature of their ideologies or organising principles (Nasong'o 2007:22–23).

Finally, Schraeder (2004) identifies the African nationalist school of thought as the sixth new trend in the critical tradition. According to Schraeder, it is also known as the Dar School on account of the fact that it originally grew out of a small cohort of African scholars based at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, who founded the African Association of Political Science in 1973. The principal premise of this school of thought is that the traditional focus of the critical tradition on the negative impacts of the global capitalist system and national economic classes must be supplemented if not supplanted by a growing cognisance of the immense political power and autonomy enjoyed by African states. 'Specifically, scholarship must reflect the indigenous power of African political institutions and actors in their relationship with domestic and international economic actors' (Schraeder 2004:336). A critical aspect of this scholarship is the promotion of Africa-specific scholarship that builds on African research networks and the interests of African scholars. Accordingly, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research (CODESRIA), headquartered in Dakar, Senegal, has emerged in the twenty-first century as the flagship, premier institution and principal outlet for critical scholarship on Africa by African scholars (see, for example, Hountondji 1999; Ibrahim 1997; Mamdani and Wamba-dia-Wamba 1995; Mkandawire and Olukoshi 1995; Murunga and Nasong'o 2007).

Just like their liberal counterparts, critical scholars are not agreed on any one single theoretical framework as possessing the requisite descriptive, explanatory and predictive potency to serve as the main guiding frame of reference for scholars in this research tradition. Nevertheless, they are united by their common resolve to confront the deleterious effects on African peoples and social systems of the neoliberal models of development imposed by the dominant social classes working in cahoots with foreign capitalist

interests, as well as their commitment to generating knowledge and policy prescriptions that reflect the lived experiences and daily realities of Africans as opposed to those that merely caricature the experience and realities of the global North (Nasong'o 2008:19–44).

### **The Dialectical Method**

A unique and analytically powerful theoretical framework that has been utilised in the study of Africa is the dialectical method. Engels ([1940] 1973) wrote that the dialectical method was principally a science of the general laws of motion and the development of nature, human society and thought. Three laws constitute the dialects. First is the law of the unity and conflict of opposites. This law states that the world in which we live is a paradoxical terrain characterised by a unity of contradictions: we have the integral vs. the differential in mathematics; action vs. reaction in mechanics; positive vs. negative electricity in physics; fusion and fission of atoms in chemistry; spirit vs. flesh in religion; and the elite vs. the masses, rulers vs. ruled, haves vs. have-nots in the political world.

Second is the law of the passage of quantitative change into qualitative change, by which small quantitative changes take place that eventually add up to a major qualitative change. For instance, the loss of a single hair at a time over time leads to a qualitative change called baldness.

Third is the law of the negation of the negation, which states that historical progress is achieved through a series of contradictions. Where the previous stage is negated, this does not represent its total elimination. The new stage does not completely wipe out the stage that it supplants, but represents the original stage at a higher level. A good example is a grain of barley that germinates if planted under the right conditions. The grain ceases to exist, it is negated, and in its place appears the plant that has arisen from it, the negation of the grain. Given its normal life process, the barley plant grows, flowers, is fertilised and finally once more produces grains of barley. As soon as these have ripened, the stalk dies. It in turn is negated. As a result of this negation of the negation we have once again the original grain of barley, not as a single unit, but ten-, twenty- or thirty-fold. The barley thus lives and evolves by means of returning to its starting point—but at a higher level. So do social change and development operate on the same law of negation and counter-negation and spiralling back to the starting point. Hence the common saying, 'The more things change, the more they remain the same.'

Ali Mazrui is the political scientist who has put this method, particularly the law of the unity of opposites, to great effect in his analysis of African political phenomena. As early as 1966, he wrote of Ghana's Kwame

Nkrumah as ‘the Leninist Czar’. He argued that Nkrumah strove to be Africa’s Lenin, a revolutionary theorist, while at the same time he sought to be Ghana’s Czar, an imperial ruler! In Mazrui’s view, ‘Nkrumah’s tragedy was a tragedy of excess, rather than of contradiction. He tried to be too much of a revolutionary monarch’ (Mazrui 1966:106).

Similarly, in a comparative study of South Africa and Nigeria, Mazrui (2006) employs the same dialectical law, arguing that the two countries represent alternative faces of Africa, mirroring the political and socioeconomic contrasts inherent in the African condition: Nigeria is the Africa of human resources; South Africa is a land of mineral resources. Nigeria is repellent to European settlement; South Africa is a magnet for such settlement. Nigeria is a monoracial society; South Africa is a multiracial society. Nigeria is grappling with the politics of religion; South Africa is preoccupied with the politics of secularism. Nigeria is Africa’s largest exporter of oil; South Africa is the continent’s largest consumer of oil. Nigeria is a paradigm of indigenisation; South Africa is a paragon of Westernisation.

Mazrui’s penchant for dialectics runs through most of his works, from diagnosing the African condition, to juxtaposing Islam between globalisation and counterterrorism, to analysing the politics of gender and the culture of sexuality (Mazrui 1986, 2004b, 2014). He has analysed the crisis of habitation in Africa—Africa as the earliest habitat of mankind but the last to become truly habitable. He has focused on the basic paradox of Africa’s location—the reality that despite the centrality of its geographical and cultural position, Africa remains the most marginal of all of the world’s continents. Mazrui has also lamented the humiliation of African peoples, a humiliation that arises from the triple burden of slavery, colonialism and racism (Mazrui 1980, 1986). Mazrui (2004a) has explored the historical, cultural and economic significance of Africa to the development of the United States. He contrasts this demonstrated significance with the combination of neglect and malice directed at the African continent and to peoples of African descent by the West in general and the United States in particular. Throughout this study, Mazrui demonstrates that this is a tale of two Edens: ‘Africa as the Eden of Lost Innocence’ and ‘America as the Eden of Current Power and Future Fulfillment’. People of African ancestry have, he argues, been part of the vanguard for the Edenisation of America. But America is also influencing Africa, the first Eden. He observes that the United States is a major force in the liberalisation of black people in Africa, but black people are also a major force in the democratisation of all people in the United States.

Mazrui's (1995) study of Pan-Africanism is emblematic of his penchant for dialectics. According to him, pan-movements are born out of a combination of nightmare and dream, anguish and vision. He writes that the nightmare and the dream that released the forces that successfully culminated in the formation of the European Union was war and poetry. Poetry provided the vision and the sensibilities of being European. War provided the practical impetus either through conquest—as European nations expanded and contracted—or through a desire to avoid some future war. This was the combination of nightmare and dream, of anguish and vision, that resulted in the consolidation of Pan-Europeanism. The Cold War may have divided Europe—between east and west—but it also united Europe within each camp. Once again, nightmare and dream played their paradoxical integrative roles. On the other hand, Pan-Africanism's impetus lay in the combined power of poetry and imperialism rather than poetry and war. Mazrui delineates two paradoxical forms of Pan-African cultural nationalism that constitute the poetry of Pan-Africanism—what he calls Romantic Primitivism and Romantic Gloriana—both of which were responses to European imperialism. Romantic Primitivism celebrates what is simple about Africa; it salutes the cattle-herder, not the castle-builder. Romantic Gloriana celebrates Africa's legends, heroes and makers of African history. It celebrates the continent's more complex achievements, including '... the pyramids of Egypt, the towering structure of Aksum, the sunken churches of Lalibela, the brooding majesty of Great Zimbabwe, the castles of Gonder. It is a tribute to Africa's empires and kingdoms, Africa's inventors and discoverers, great Shaka Zulu rather than the unknown peasant' (Mazrui 1995:35).

Both forms of poetry (Romantic Primitivism and Romantic Gloriana) were responses to European imperialism and its cultural arrogance: Europeans claimed that Africans were simple and invented nothing (an alleged *fact*), and that those who were simple and invented nothing were, ipso facto, uncivilised (a *value* judgement). Romantic Primitivism accepted Europe's alleged facts about Africa—that Africa was simple and invented nothing—but rejected Europe's value judgement, that having invented nothing Africa was thus uncivilised. To Romantic Primitivism, simplicity was one version of civilisation. African simplicity was a function of the fact that the African lived in a paradise, in a Garden of Eden—where food was provided for by the bounty of nature and where the climate was without winter. For its part, Romantic Gloriana rejected Europe's alleged facts about Africa—that Africa was simple and invented nothing—but seemingly accepted Europe's value judgement, that civilisation is to be measured by

complexity and innovation, hence its focus on Africa's great empire builders, on Africa's legendary leaders, great monuments and extraordinary historical feats. Mazrui notes that the same African country can produce both types of Pan-African nationalists. He gives the example of Senegal, wherein Léopold Sédar Senghor, a major thinker and poet in the Negritude School, belonged to the Romantic Primitivism School, while his compatriot, Cheikh Anta Diop, belonged to the Romantic Gloriana one. Whereas Senghor accepted Europe's alleged facts and value judgements about Africa, going so far as to posit that 'emotion is black and reason is Greek', Diop spent much of his scholarly life demonstrating Africa's contributions to global civilisation and emphasising that Pharaonic Egypt's civilisation was a black civilisation.

Overall, Mazrui argues that the reality on the African continent is a fusion of the simple and the complex, the cattle-herder and the castle-builder. It is much more than Romantic Primitivism and Romantic Gloriana. In his view, real Pan-Africanism must go beyond the stimuli of poetry and imperialism if it is to succeed in constructing institutions to overcome its political, social and economic problems. Towards this end, he delineates, in his dialectical style, what he calls a fundamental duality in the paradigm of Pan-Africanism—the Pan-Africanism of liberation and the Pan-Africanism of integration. Pan-Africanism of liberation is embodied in the solidarity of Africans in Africa and the diaspora who fought against colonialism, who confronted racism and fought against apartheid South Africa. Pan-Africanism of integration has sought regional economic integration, a free trade area, a development alliance, or an economic union or economic community. According to Mazrui (1995), the Pan-Africanism of liberation has been impressively victorious. But the Pan-Africanism of integration has proved a dismal failure. Accordingly, he concludes that Africans are better at uniting for freedom than at uniting for development!

### **Conclusion: Empiricist Positivism vs. Normative Interpretivism**

Underlying the different theoretical approaches to the study of African politics and the epistemologies generated therefrom has been a contestation, albeit latent, mostly, between positivist and interpretivist orientations. Generally, the developmentalist liberal approaches have tended to be positivist whereas the critical emancipatory approaches have tended to be interpretivist. Positivism believes in the unity of social and natural science methodologies and seeks to generate objective knowledge. It is a deductive or theory-testing approach, underpinned by an empiricist or objectivist ontology according to which facts are neutral and the truth lies out there, independent of our consciousness. We can capture it if we use the right

methods. Positivists seek to explain how and why things happen using measurement, correlation, statistical logic and verification. Their typical methods are surveys, questionnaires and random sampling. For positivists, if you cannot measure it, your knowledge is meagre and unsatisfactory. They thus accuse interpretivist approaches of not being 'proper science' methodologically and thus generating illegitimate epistemologies.

Interpretivism or reflexivism, on the other hand, believes in the essential difference between natural and social sciences. It distinguishes between 'brute facts' and 'social facts' and argues that the social world cannot be measured with the same methodological tools as the natural world. Interpretivists thus seek to generate subjective knowledge using an inductive or theory-building approach undergirded by a subjectivist ontology. In other words, the truth is complex since it is socially and intersubjectively constructed and is thus subject to perception and interpretation. Interpretivists seek to elucidate meaning in order to understand how and why things happen the way they do. Their typical methods include ethnographic studies, in-depth interviews, content analysis and participant observation, through which they generate normative epistemologies. They deride empiricist positivism as elevating method above substance and of being epistemologically conservative and thus pro status quo. For interpretivists, the point is not just to explain the political world, but—more importantly—to change it! Arguably, therefore, normative epistemologies generated by interpretivist approaches as demonstrated by the critical school have tended to be more relevant in terms of their transformational impact than empiricist positivist epistemologies, which essentially seek to solve problems within the extant status quo, as the case of the developmentalist theoretical school amply illustrates.

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