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# 1

## Introduction: Africa and International Relations Theory

*Kevin C. Dunn*

### **Postcards from the edge**

In his examination of the Rwandan genocide, Philip Gourevitch notes a 'stubborn misconception' dominating Western attitudes toward Africa – 'that Africans generate humanitarian catastrophes but don't really make meaningful politics' (1998: 326). Gourevitch illustrates how the international community ignored a genocide that destabilized the entire Central African region and left over a million individuals dead. Assuming that 'Africans were just being Africans,' the Western media and policy makers tended to ignore the 1994 genocide and its (continuing) after-shocks.

This assumption – that Africa does not have meaningful politics, only humanitarian disasters – has marginalized the continent on the world's political stage. In the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, the continent was, at best, a peripheral concern for the major powers. During the Cold War, Africa was either viewed as a strategic chessboard for Superpower competition (Southern Africa and the Horn being the two prime examples) or as another section of the globe's 'backwards' backyard. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the continent's major diplomatic tool – exploiting Superpower rivalry – disappeared. The Asian economic disasters, the violent unraveling of the Balkans and the capitalist transition of Eastern Europe continue to preoccupy Western Europe and North America. Despite highly publicized tours by US President Bill Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair in the late 1990s, Africa finds itself, for better or worse, pushed further off the world stage. Opting to be passive bystanders in the destructive wars that ripped the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone asunder, Western powers now seem to prefer letting Africans resolve their own conflicts. This may be related

## 2 Introduction

to the fact that the Western media continue to employ 'Heart of Darkness'-style rhetoric to paint an image of an incomprehensible land filled with natural and man-made disasters, beyond Western reason or control. Africa is apparently useful only for generating sensationalized reports of human suffering, not for contributing to any 'serious' discussions of world politics.

While Gourevitch's quote specifically referred to the Western media, his observation could equally apply to the discipline of International Relations (IR). The marginalization of Africa by Western policy makers has a correlation in the continent's marginalization by the dominant (Western-produced) IR theories. For example, syllabi for many graduate-level IR courses give Africa incredible short shrift, or ignore it altogether. In some cases more attention is paid to Antarctica, seemingly a hotbed of 'meaningful politics' (Dunn 2000). This marginalization extends beyond the classroom and is embedded in the dominant IR theories themselves. Simply put, Africa has long been absent in theorizing about world politics.

*Neorealism*, for example, unabashedly focuses on the so-called 'great' powers of IR. Africa and the Third World have no place in their systemic analysis. As Kenneth Waltz stated, 'it would be . . . ridiculous to construct a theory of international politics on Malaysia and Costa Rica . . . [A] general theory of international politics is necessarily based on the great powers' (1979: 72–3). Likewise, Classical Realism has had little use for Africa. Hans Morgenthau shockingly asserted in his classic *Politics Among Nations* that Africa did not have a history before the Second World War; it was a 'politically empty space' (1973: 369).

While critiquing neorealism, *neo-liberals* re-employ a similarly narrow 'great-power' focus in their own theorizing. Neo-liberals' marginalization of Africa is often based on their view that the continent lacks hegemonic power. Africa, it is assumed, suffers the whims of the stronger global players. When neo-liberals have paid attention to Africa, they have been motivated by development theories aimed at reproducing Western economic, political and cultural ideals (see Dickson 1997).

At first glance, *structuralist* theories such as Marxism, Dependency and World System approaches seem to re-focus IR's gaze on Africa. Much of this literature uses African examples to illustrate the exploitative, hierarchical nature of the existing world system(s). Such theories have been instrumental in exposing the historical specificity – as well as the exploitative structure – of the modern Westphalian state system. Upon closer analysis, however, these theories often replicate Western biases by viewing the continent solely as part of the global 'periphery'; an agency-less

victim of Great Power/core manipulations. Africa exists only to the extent that it is acted *upon*.

### From margin to center

Needless to say, it is an enormous mistake to marginalize Africa on the arrogant assumption that it *lacks meaningful politics*. In the 'post-' worlds of colonialism and the Cold War, African individuals and policy makers continue to construct creative and original responses to meet their political, economic, and social needs. Moreover, the continent exists at the center of various paradigms and discourses generally ignored by traditional IR. For example, Africa exists in the privileged center of global discourses on the environment, migration flows, biodiversity, ecology, gender, human security, land mines, development, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international financial institutions (IFIs), and Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). While Africa may be marginal to the world's legitimate trade, it is central to illegal global trade in drugs, arms, and ivory. As the UN Women's Decade drew to a close, Africa and African women's experiences were at the core of discourses and analyses. Though Africa may be marginal to traditional security discussion, the continent is central to discourses on 'new' security issues that focus on the environment, women's bodies, human welfare, and sustainable development. Thus, by adjusting one's focus slightly, it becomes obvious that Africa occupies a *central* position in the practice of IR.

Deconstructing traditional IR theory reveals that Africa holds a central, if problematic, position there as well. The continent is the ever-present and necessary counterpart that makes the dominant theories complete. It is the periphery to the core; the small states upon which the 'great' powers act. As post-colonial scholars such as Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, Anne McClintock, Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, and have noted, Africa provides the mirror in which the West defines itself. In other words, Africa is the *Other* necessary for the construction of a mythical Western *Self*. Yet, this Western *Self* remains the author and authority of IR. Within IR theory, Africa is the voiceless space upon/into which the West can write and act. The West's authorship of IR theory is a hegemonic practice which closes out other possible readings/writings of world politics. As a product of Modernity, Western IR theory therefore rests on the necessary marginalization of Africa and other non-Western sites of knowledge.

Africa's pseudo-absence in IR theory is exacerbated by the continued privileging of concepts that help maintain its invisibility. Basic concepts that are central to traditional IR – anarchy, sovereignty, the state, the market, the international/domestic dichotomy – become problematic, if not highly dubious, when applied to Africa. Rather than use African experiences to revise their theories, most IR scholars simply continue to ignore the continent. At best they note Africa's 'uniqueness' and relegate it to a footnote; the theories which created Africa's erasure remain dominant. The hegemonic reading/writing of IR ignores and marginalizes that which it can not explain – or rather, it excises that which illustrates the partiality of its constructed text. Thus, Africa's shadow existence is perpetuated by the cycle of Western theory building. By defining what is 'political' in narrow terms, African politics are dismissed as being meaningless.

This collection seeks to rethink traditional IR theories by taking Africa as its starting point. Yet, the aim of this collection is more than just 'bringing Africa into the mix.' By using African examples, this collection seeks to problematize both existing IR theory and theorizing in general. While this contribution belongs to a long tradition of scholarship critical of Western provincialism in IR, it is different in that it is not trying to construct a 'better' universal theory. Nor is it the interest of the authors to construct an autonomous 'African' IR theory. Rather, the authors are using Africa to disrupt existing ways of reading IR by exposing the limitations and fissures of these denotative interpretations. Specifically, the authors seek to problematize the key concepts in the text: security, power, states, nations, and sovereignty. We begin with the radical notion (for IR theorists) that Africa *does* generate meaningful politics and that there is much to learn from studying and incorporating it into the way we think and talk about IR.

In an article criticizing the American study of IR, Thomas Biersteker (1999) argues that one way to overcome IR's provincialism is to examine scholarship from other parts of the globe and insights from other disciplines. In fact, there is already a growing literature, much of it originating from the African continent, that challenges IR's provincialism. In terms of Globalization and IR, important insights have been provided by Baylis and Smith (1997); Held and McGrew (1998); and Stubbs and Underhill (2000). For Africanist contributions to international relations, the works of Rothchild and Keller (1998); Nel and McGowan (1999); Braathen, Bøås and Soether (2000); Vale, Swatuk and Oden (2000); and MacFarlane *et al.* (forthcoming); have offered valuable contributions. *Africa's Challenge to International Relations Theory* should be seen within

this larger movement to make IR more reflective of, and responsible to, the *international* sphere. Yet, the uniqueness of this book is that it addresses and challenges the central and foundational tenets of traditional IR theory. Rather than trying to expand current IR to include Africa, it seeks to illustrate the fundamental flaws of that approach. As such, it is not demanding more 'space' in IR but a better IR.

Treating international relations as a text, traditional Western theories construct a reading that is similar to what Roland Barthes refers to as *denotation*. As he argues, 'denotation is not the first meaning [of the text], but it pretends to be so . . . it is . . . the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature,' it 'appear[s] to be telling us something simple, literal, primitive: something *true*' (1974: 9, emphasis in original). Such a reading closes out other readings by delegitimizing them, claiming its own interpretation as originary. Promoting a denotative reading is both a source and effect of power. Yet, it is a partial, incomplete reading. Revealing Africa's position (if not centrality) in the text of IR illustrates the incompleteness and limitations of this reading. What is needed is a *connotative* reading. As Barthes said, '[t]o interpret a text is not to give it a . . . meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it' (Barthes 1974: 5, emphasis in original). Thus, the purpose of this collection is to use Africa to disrupt the traditional hegemonic reading/writing of IR theory and open up a pluralistic space for theoretical interventions.

But by employing Africa as the critical site for intervention, one must ask: what constitutes *Africa*? When Samuel Huntington, in his *Clash of Civilizations* (1996), collapses thousands of cultures into a totalized 'African civilization,' one should rightly question if such a thing as 'Africa' exists and what it actually looks like. In the face of the African Diaspora and the multiple identities employed across and outside the continent, one may equally question what constitutes an *African*. Furthermore, in the field of academia, what constitutes an *Africanist*? The authors do not seek to force definitive answers upon these questions. Forcing closure closes off debate and discussion. Leaving them open-ended allows for fruitful interrogation and intervention. It is in such a spirit of interrogation and intervention that the authors offer their work.

On a final note, it should be stressed that this not merely an academic endeavor. This work is informed by *real-life concerns*. As we enter the twenty-first century, there is an urgency to construct new theories of IR. As a global community, we are facing economic, environmental, and social catastrophes on levels previously unimagined. Though the

threat of an all-out nuclear exchange (the central preoccupation of most mainstream IR theorizing during the Cold War era) appears to have greatly abated, the insecurity of the world's population has not. Faced with environmental degradation, economic destitution, and political marginalization, most people must struggle just to meet their daily needs. Promises of a brave new world, let alone a new world order, have had little positive impact on most of humanity. The old theories have failed us. At best, they have stifled creativity and alternative global visions. At worse, they have compounded, if not caused, the problems that befall us as citizens of the world.

Thus, as scholars, we have a duty to address these crises. Theories that continue to take the West as their starting point tend to slide toward the vision put forth by commentators such as Robert Kaplan (1994). In his view of a 'coming anarchy,' the majority of humanity is sinking into a hellish nightmare of chaos caused by intrinsic backwardness and a failure to adjust to Western modernity. The authors of this collection reject such a vision. Instead, they embrace the challenge before us: to construct new ways of thinking about world politics that engender *creative and productive solutions and discourses*. By using Africa as our starting point, we hope to create a new language, a new way of thinking about IR.

### **Structure of the book**

This volume is organized into three parts. Part I, 'Troubling Concepts,' contains four essays which problematize fundamental concepts of traditional IR theory. These concepts are 'troubling' in the sense that they do not easily apply to African reality and are thus incomprehensible in that context. On the other hand, these concepts become 'troubled' when African experiences are used to subvert their supposed universality. Thus, the authors in Part I are interested in demonstrating the problematic nature of these foundational concepts and the denotative interpretations given to them by the dominant/dominating readings of IR.

In Chapter 2, Assis Malaquias questions the dominance of state-centric approaches in Western IR theory. Using the case of Angola, Malaquias shows the analytical limitations of the state and offers an alternative approach drawing upon the nation and nationalist movements. As he illustrates, one is unable to adequately explain the international relations of the region without such a reconceptualization. In Chapter 3, Siba Grovogui offers a critique of traditional conceptions of sovereignty, an idea central to all Westphalian-derived IR

theories. Using a comparative study of the Congo (Zaire), Belgium, and Switzerland, Grovogui illustrates that sovereignty is a historical mode of global governance intended to effect a moral order of identity and subjectivity.

Kevin Dunn further problematizes the concept of the sovereign state by questioning how IR theorists employ, conceptualize, and talk about the state. Taking recent scholars to task for their evolutionary rhetoric and myopic focus on the state, Dunn in Chapter 4 illustrates the limitations and consequences of such perspectives and offers a reconceptualization of the 'state.' In Chapter 5, Janis van der Westhuizen critiques traditional IR conceptions of power. Drawing from the literature of business marketing, van der Westhuizen introduces the concept of *marketing power* to IR theory. Using South Africa as his case study, van der Westhuizen shows how the government has used music, film and sport to enhance its international standing.

Part II, 'Theoretical Interventions,' offers six chapters which disrupt the dominant readings of IR theory by showing how these readings fail to address African experiences. These essays offer fresh insights for the construction of more fruitful and pluralistic readings/writings of IR. The first two chapters directly address the dominant theories in the discipline. John Clark in Chapter 6 offers a reinterpretation of Realism that rejects the positivist path taken by most of its recent proponents. Clark revisits the basic tenets of Classical Realism in his attempt to construct a theory of *regime security* that advances our understanding of African international relations. In Chapter 7, Tandeka Nkiwane examines some of the challenges presented by African and Africanist scholars to many of the assumptions inherent in Liberalism. In particular, she address the liberal promises of the 'end of history,' economic growth coterminous with political liberalization, and the 'democratic peace' in African contexts.

Randolph Persaud's Chapter 8 reconceptualizes the theory of sovereignty through the work of Marcus Garvey. Persaud illustrates how Garvey rejected equating the concept with geographical space and sought alternative definitions. Such a rereading/writing not only problematizes traditional uses of sovereignty but provides fruitful paths for counter-hegemonic praxis. In Chapter 9, Sakah Mahmud explores the ineffectiveness of international sanctions by 'great powers' against the less powerful African countries of Libya and Nigeria. Mahmud argues that mainstream IR theories fail to capture the alternative importance of ideologies, the nature of inter-state/cultural interactions, and the type of 'diplomacy of solidarity' that characterize non-Western international relations.

Sandra MacLean in Chapter 10 explores the pressures on the state in Southern Africa in the current transition from a Westphalian to post-Westphalian order. MacLean argues that, given the extensive domestic transitions now occurring in the region, the reactions by Southern African states to both external pressures of globalization and internal pressures for democratization and regime maintenance offer important insights into the system transformation that occupies contemporary IR analysis. In Chapter 11, Larry Swatuk argues that mainstream IR, as practiced in the state houses of Southern Africa, is caught in a modernist moment which, by privileging the state and the market as unproblematic and apolitical concepts, negatively affects geographical regions marginalized by discourse of world politics. By his own account, Swatuk presents this polemic as a warning of the dangers we all face. As such, he sees IR and modernity constructing an 'Africa' as both something to be 'saved' and as 'savior' itself.

Part III of the book examines the implications and policy ramifications engendered by the preceding chapters. In Chapter 12, James Jude Hentz argues that the US' uncritical employment of the Westphalian model is flawed and leads to counter-productive policies. By re-examining Africa from alternative perspectives that stress *developmental integration*, Hentz provides ground for specific policy recommendations. In the concluding Chapter 13, Timothy Shaw explores the increasingly important roles of companies and civil societies, as well as a wide variety of states and inter-governmental organizations, in the African context. Particular attention is focused on the human security/peace-building nexus, new regionalisms, emerging markets, and the prospects for a 'new realism.' Shaw concludes by offering multiple 'lessons' from contemporary Central Africa for a variety of overlapping disciplines and discourses.

Throughout this collection, the authors seek to replace the dominant/dominating denotative reading of the IR text with a more pluralist connotative reading. In advancing such readings of IR theory, the authors refrain from closing off potential paths for analysis and action. In fact, there is a striking amount of diversity among the contributors. For example, the meanings of 'security' and 'development' are left open-ended and problematic, though clearly most contributors reject the traditional readings/writings of both. Furthermore, there is disagreement over the usefulness of certain paradigms and concepts, such as Realism and the state. Yet, what links these scholars together is their recognition that Africa is rich with meaningful politics; politics that disrupt existing readings/writings of IR theory.

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