Africanizing the State: Globalizing the discipline

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> There are certain trees that seem worthless but when gone leave empty spaces through which bad winds blow. There are other trees that seem useless but when felled worse things grow in their place.
> — Ben Okri, *Famished Road.*

Review Article :

Comaroff, J and Comaroff, J. (2012). *Theory from the South: or, How Euro-America is evolving toward Africa.* Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers.

Death, C. (2016). *The green state in Africa.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Taylor, I. (2010). *The international relations of Sub-Saharan Africa.* New York; London: Continuum.

International Relations (IR) as a discipline has failed to adequately globalize to account for the most pressing issues challenging all levels of politics around the world. The theory, the scholars and the scholarship do not reflect the complex and ever-evolving nature of the social make up or the needs of society. This book review assesses this issue and the way these three monographs seek to deal with the ongoing question of Africa's place in the discipline and in the academe more broadly. By analyzing, comparing and contrasting the arguments of these authors this paper will unpack many of the issues facing the continent and its place in scholarship, while

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> more importantly painting a picture of the important road needed to write the continent back into the theories that purport to analyze and treat it. Today, the major issues facing the world are those which are felt most by the African continent and include issues of poverty, disease and environmental pressures rather than large scale state on state warfare with which the discipline was initially developed to deal with. It must now evolve and must globalize itself in order to deal with the issues of the modern globalized world.

Mearsheimer and Walt (2013) warn scholars of International Relations (IR) about rigor mortis which Thakur (2015, p. 214) presents as a cause to "the 'theoretical peace' in the discipline, the lack of theoretical contributions, and the absence of theoretical rigor." These authors suggest this end of theory would imply there are no new theoretical paradigms to be explored and that henceforth IR would be developed largely through substantive inquiries, rather than the rigorous theoretical foundations on which it was built. To those who subscribe only to the disciplinary traditions of IR, this is true. Theories about large scale conflicts, the traditional Weberian conception of the nation-state as the sole referent object, and theorizing about issues which can be neatly separated by boundaries and treated through traditional understandings of power, hegemony and sovereignty have been exhausted and in this sense rigor mortis has indeed set in on the discipline of IR.

The world however has evolved, and alongside this evolution the major issues in global politics have similarly complexified. Put simply, this evolution can be conceptualized as the many processes of globalization. As the world has globalized, many scholars have criticized IR for failing to globalize as well (Abrahamsen, 2017; Dalby, 2015; Ní Mhurchú, 2015; Thakur, 2015; A. B. Tickner, 2013). It has become viewed as a Western-centric discipline that is set in its ways rigorously churning out new versions of the same academics trained in the largely unchanging disciplinary traditions and approaches, whose work is accepted only when it conforms to the desired form and rationalities of the leading IR journals of yesteryear.

In this sense IR has forgotten the developing world, and within this vast region, specifically the continent of Africa. Africa, and Africans are largely invisible in the literature, and have certainly in no major way been formative to its evolution (or lack thereof). IR's inability, unwillingness, and abject failure to globalize and become both representative of, and represented by Africa, runs parallel to its failure to adequately evolve to treat the problems that the era of globalization have brought with it.

The modern problems that affect us can largely be seen to affect individuals rather than states (Burgess, 2014). They transcend borders, laws, regulations, and largely cannot be met through any degree of military might. They are unrecognizable in so many ways to the theorists of the past, and while breaking from foundational concepts and theories in so many ways, they remain imbedded in the world founded on principles of sovereignty, the rule of law, and centred around power-politics. The three monographs upon which this review article will focus each place a unique focus on Africa and the challenges it faces today. All of them theorize the various ways in which the challenges facing the African continent relate directly to the challenges facing the wider world and the effects these have on the discipline of IR. It is often and perhaps increasingly claimed that African politics cannot be understood without world politics. The three works reviewed presently put into focus why this, as well as its reverse, have become inextricably linked in limitless way in the modern era of hyper-globalization. This review article will compare and contrast ideas put forward by these and other authors to explore the issue of climate change politics in Africa to conceptualize the way in which global politics have changed. I will ultimately compile the theses put forth by these authors to argue that there is not only an absolute need for the discipline to globalize, and to evolve to treat modern issues, but that we are also already on the precipice of doing so and possess all the tools needed thanks to gradual inroads made by feminist scholars, neo-Gramscian and post-structuralists.

While I posit that these approaches are not sufficiently global in the sense I have begun to lay out above, they have set the ground work for more critical approaches such as critical race theory and post-colonial theory which have contributed to challenging some of the core aspects of traditional realist/liberal/constructivist IR theory. What is required for this necessary evolution then, is not revolutionary change of any sort but rather, a revolution in the way in which we employ the knowledge and tools already at our disposal.

Disciplining the discipline

There has been great and ongoing criticism of the scholarly process in recent decades, specifically, as one might imagine, by those who fall outside certain disciplinary boundaries. IR has certainly not escaped this critique as the problems with which it is being tasked to theorize about have evolved and globalized outside the scope of its traditional means. Many, like Jan Aart Scholte argue that the problem lies in the very way by which scholars of IR are trained, accepted and thus perpetuate continuous processes of disciplinary fortifications as,

> Most professional research continues to be funnelled through discipline-related organs. Similarly, most academic conferences have remained tribal conclaves on disciplinary lines. Most academic funding has continued to flow through disciplinary channels, and respect of disciplinarity normally still provides researchers with a faster track to promotion than alternative approaches. In short, some minor inroads aside, disciplinary methodology remains quite firmly entrenched in the contemporary globalizing world (Scholte, 2000, p. 198).

This claim is true in many ways and has contributed directly to many of the problems now facing the discipline. Taylor (2010) highlights that it is because of this process that the scholarship and scholars have become overwhelmingly Westernized, and specifically Americanized. Thus, the issues treated by the discipline have remained largely the same and are viewed through the same theoreti-

cal lens of old by the same sets of eyes, and subsequently discussed with the same voice using the same language. This is only further proven with the very texts with which this book review is concerned as, not only are the three books written by Western Educated, Westerners, but similarly are the vast majority of authors providing supporting evidence throughout.

To be sure, this is not by design, or to support my arguments or conclusions in any specific or pre-ordained way. It has simply traditionally been a challenge to find much in the way of truly 'African' IR scholarship. This poses several problems which are treated by these books in different ways and while they are all open about the issue, none of them are able to provide an adequate response to it. The main reason put forth for this by Comaroff and Comaroff (2012), as is made implicit throughout their arguments, is the way in which global politics seem only to follow great centres of power and wealth. Even for these authors who seek to point to this problem and thus to provide potential solutions for it, both to help the discipline and the continent, they perhaps inadvertently reify the very issue themselves. They specifically state that South Africa is indeed the 'most Western/American' of all the African countries. It boasted, until recently, the continent's largest economy, is the most economically developed in many ways, and is often seen as a regional leader. Perhaps partly as a result of all of this but serving only to perpetuate the issues facing the discipline of IR with which they attempt to treat, they discuss South African case studies far more than the rest of the vast and diverse continent combined. To be sure, this is partly a result of it being the country of which there is the most evidence, scholarship and information to work with and where the authors have focused their research and studies. However, in writing a book that purports to bring theory back to the south—put otherwise to input Africa into IR—their approach and methodologies, serve to remind us that there are haves and have nots in the world and that much more often than not, it is only the haves that

find themselves in the scholarship, and only they who are represented in, or representative of the theory.

Taylor (2010) provides a thorough, though far from exhaustive, analysis of the plethora of ways in which this disciplinary tradition has worked to write Africa out of both International Relations and international relations. He, like many, widely discusses the ways in which the international community (but mainly the West) have contributed to the protracted underdevelopment of the African continent and shows the many ways they are continuing to do so. Taylor provides what has by this point become a common understanding of African international relations arguing for 'African solutions to African problems.' With this theoretical approach, he and other authors acknowledge the way Africa has been left out of the discourse in so many ways and that rather than adding Africa to IR and stirring, as Abrahamsen (2017) argues will not produce great benefit, the continent and its people must manage its development and relations to the rest of the world from within. Beyond this, Taylor seeks to address the need for African agency, and while acknowledging that it is something that has always been there, as described by Bayart (2000) with his 'extraversion,' Taylor still packages it in an almost 'Africa vs. them' understanding—one where Africa is not itself inserted as an important cog of an international system that is indivisible.

Taylor provides an interesting introduction to modern African politics and a thorough analysis of the new ways in which the globalized world is both affected by and affects the continent. He does however tend to be largely descriptive in his engagement and reading his work provides less in the way of new theoretical foundation by which to provide the much-needed reconceptualization of African politics. Taylor articulates the ways in which Africa has been left out of important debates but fails to provide any meaningful remedy for treating this problem or any of the other issues facing an inadequately evolved discipline. Subsequent sections of this review will

demonstrate how the authors build on these conceptions in order to grow toward a more thorough and useful understanding of Africa and its place in IR.

While together the monographs focused on in this review shed important light on many of the failures of traditional IR scholarship with regards to keeping pace with modern issues in global politics in general, and with issues facing the Global South in particular, it must further be understood that critical inroads have begun to de-colonize and globalize the discipline, albeit at an underwhelming pace. Despite the lethargy with which change is occurring, it is im-portant to understand the incursions that have been made by femi-nist IR scholar, neo-Gramscians and post-structuralists. This type of cutting-edge critical research has laid important theoretical frame-work on which more recent developments in critical race theory, post-colonial theory as well indigenous knowledge in IR theory have continued to decolonize the traditional disciplinary fortifications that served to keep so much out for so long. The list of authors has grown too long to explore at length here but some noteworthy con-tributions stems from Anievas, Manchanda, & Shilliam (2014), Sajed (2018) Smith (2012), and Tickner (2013). It is beyond the scope of this review to delve into these important contributions but suffice it to say that scholars of International Relations have not all been hamstrung by the rigor mortis discussed by Mearsheimer and Walt. Many are indeed developing ever more cutting-edge approach-es to ensure the theories, approaches, methodologies, and the schol-ars of the discipline are not left behind by the ever-complexifying and globalizing world.

Africanizing conceptions of the state

Africans are often portrayed as peasants, tied to their land, loyal to their clans, families, and localities, while cut off in many ways from the wider world and disassociated in any meaningful way from

their state. In this sense it is often portrayed as a continent of individuals rather than states and even at that its states are often known more for their fragility than ability (Howard, 2014). Taylor compares this to the ways in which it has become fashionable both within IR and without to write of the doing away of the state. For Sassen (1994) this is less a disappearance of the state but rather, a disaggregation and partial re-aggregation of it. There is a plethora of authors who have approached this subject and regardless of their precise conclusions, it is generally clear that more often than not it is 'the African state' that fits these models of disappearing states—at least much more or more rapidly than 'proper' Western states (Ní Mhurchú, 2015; Thakur, 2015; A. B. Tickner, 2013). While I would argue that this is incorrect for many reasons, the above two notions of disappearing African states and the growing importance of individuals are key aspects to problematize and analyze. This is not however, to say that the state is either disappearing or that dealing with modern problems would fall outside the paradigm of traditional IR with the state as the referent object. It is rather to argue for a reconceptualization of the state with a renewed emphasis on its constituent parts. States are comprised of individuals and it is individuals who are increasingly at risk with modern global challenges rather than the state itself which used to face existential threats (Burgess, 2014). Taylor makes this clear in writing of the ample ways Africans are being negatively affected by the increasingly compound effects of globalization and the existing international order.

As debates within the discipline of IR have seethed around some of its foundational concepts, two of the most contested have been 'state' and 'sovereignty.' Both concepts are at once inextricably linked and cannot be understood separately, yet each have vastly differing understandings in their own way. It is through adequately conceptualizing these two notions that one can grasp a necessarily evolved modern understanding of the issues facing Africa and global politics writ large. Death (2016) explains that "sovereignty is a tool

and form of government, of governmentality, by which subjects can be divided, classified, and made responsible. The ecological implications of practices of sovereignty are neither straightforwardly good nor bad." (2016 p. 231). Indeed, varying conceptions of the state are central to the arguments of all the authors discussed in this review. For Taylor, the state is largely the issue, for Comaroff and Comaroff a forward-looking understanding of the evolution of the state will be the solution, and Death presents the 'Green State in Africa' as a wider assemblage in the global sphere that will help allow for a retooling of the state by political scientists to better grasp its place in the modern world.

Comaroff and Comaroff concur with the notion that Africa is in many ways a region of individuals over states, and for them this is central to their thesis that indeed 'Euro-America is evolving toward Africa' rather than Africa playing a sort of catch-up in modernization as traditional theories would have it. This argument is furthered by Smith who details how the major issues facing the world today are not being adequately addressed by IR and that "it is quite obvious that Africa, its development and its special problems have had strikingly little impact on IR theory" (Smith, 2012, p. 22). Many authors, including those focused on in this review, have posited that global politics and indeed IR cannot be adequately understood without Africa, while some further this, arguing that the continent is indeed central to any comprehension of global politics. Often however, these arguments are vague and do not explain what this means for theorising about the modern world outside of a few historic examples. Comaroff and Comaroff seek to advance their theory that Africa is leading the modernization of global politics, along with conceptions of the state, sovereignty and even power as it is so centrally inserted into world events and (perhaps unfortunately) exists at the forefront of the type of challenges that IR must now seek to treat. While perhaps at one-time Africa existed on the fringes of major world events as demonstrated by Taylor (2010) and affected global

outcomes only marginally, it is now central to major issues and re-configuring the very way global politics happen and are understood.

Death takes this a step further, grounding Comaroff and Co-maroff's abstract theorizing into a concrete example of what IR in the modern era can look like with Africa at its centre, or at the very least thoroughly inserted into an indivisible system. Each of these authors is open about the existential issues facing the state and the way narrow conceptions of the state have so limited a global IR. In reading them together though, none offer an alternative and as such, it becomes clear that working within the disciplinary traditions that revolve around a world of states, sovereignty and power politics is indeed where our understanding both as academics, and otherwise should remain. It is clear however, that a reinvention of the frame-work within which these concepts are understood and the rules of engagement with which the scholarship functions is necessary in order to bring about understandings that are conducive to the for-ward evolutionary motion of the issues facing these modern, and constantly reconceptualised, perhaps even disaggregated and reag-gregated entities. For death,

> A truly environmental politics implies not the end of the state but a state that is reshaped, refashioned, and transformed to enable better prospects for human and nonhuman flourishing, while acknowledging that our hu-man capacity to ever know the consequences of our actions is limited (Death, 2016, p. 245).

Death focuses on climate change and environmental issues as a ve-hicle through which to propel his arguments, but this could easily be read into both Taylor and Comaroff and Comaroff's works and ra-ther than 'a truly environmental politics' might be read as 'a truly international politics.' These authors offer quite different packages that take vastly different routes, but all are presenting similar theo-retical attempts to write Africa, and the issues of globalization back into both IR and international relations.

African solutions to global problems

One of the arguments put forth for Africa's many issues, and its resultant omission from global politics is the failure of the African state to modernize. In so many ways the Africa state is a descriptor for the dark 'other' to what we in the West envision ourselves to be living in—fully functioning states with a monopoly on violence, functioning institutions, strong defined borders etc. (Abrahamsen, 2013; Howard, 2014). As many African states lack these apparently necessary components, the argument goes that they have failed to adequately modernize. In laying the foundation for what might be the most revolutionary of the approaches treated in this review the Comaroff and Comaroff contest

> that modernity in the south is not adequately understood as a derivative or a doppleganger, a callow copy or a counterfeit, of the Euro-American "original." To the contrary: it demands to be apprehended and addressed in its own right. Modernity in Africa—which, as Masilela (2003) shows has a deep history—is a hydra-headed, polymorphous, mutating ensemble of signs and practices in terms of which people across the continent have long made their lives; this partly in dialectical relationship with the global north and its expansive capitalist imperium, partly with others of the same hemisphere, partly intra-continently, partly in localized enclaves (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012 p.7).

This it is an important starting place in attempting to understand Africa's place in IR as well as its relative 'modernity.' To be sure, Africa is a continent that is not in the West. It has its own unique history, culture, and has experienced global events in its own way, though it has certainly experienced them, been greatly affect by and likewise had a great effect on them. Thus, Africa is indeed modern as many scholars rightly point out, but it is modern in its own way, not simply as some distorted refractionary vision of Western modernity. That being said, it is a set of states that exists within the same world and same international order as those of the West and thus it is best to understand "the green state in Africa [as] the effect of an assemblage of environmental rationalities, discourses and technologies of gov-

ernment through which territories, populations, economies and international relations have been brought within the scope of sedimented power relations" (Death, 2016 p. 234). Death lays out his version of the 'green state in Africa' as a new conceptualization of the state which provides one example of a much sought-after novel lens through which to understand the place of the state vis a vis modern global issues. One which provides a way to view states, both in Africa and elsewhere, as part of a wider assemblage rather than as separate and unequal component parts of global politics and IR as has historically been the case.

While providing an entertaining, interesting and unique vision of the African state and its place in a global assemblage, Death's main fault can be deemed over-ambition. While he focuses on environmental politics and the green state in Africa, unlike Comaroff who present too narrow a geographical base, Death reaches to incorporate every corner of the continent and attempts to present a laundry list of issues, challenges, strengths and weaknesses relating to the African continent and at times the wealth of information becomes overwhelming and detracts from a methodical and succinct presentation of his argument. While for the most part it becomes clear his overall statement of what the green state of Africa is, and what it means for global politics can become lost in the plethora of wider ongoing debates in African politics which he presents well, but perhaps too immoderately.

As has been described, the increasing and seemingly endless complexification of global politics and the issues facing both Africa and the world continue to pose limitless challenges. Climate change, often deemed the greatest challenge of our generation, encapsulates these growing complexities of both the issues, as well as the ongoing debates within IR (Dalby, 2015). It is the very nature of these challenges such as terrorism, HIV/AIDS and other diseases, and climate change as a few examples that go to the heart of the internal debates that have been plaguing (or perhaps strengthening) the discipline

for quite some time. As such, in sifting through a wide birth of events throughout Africa's history by conceptualizing a potential new understanding of the state in relation to the issues of climate change which encapsulates so well the nature of modern issues, Death offers one account of what a different IR can look like that is importantly both more global, but also remains within existing traditional disciplinary boundaries.

Conclusions: Toward a global discipline

While engaging quite different approaches the authors build chronologically one off another's theses to together, bring us toward a better conceptualization of a modern international politics that provides a more global understanding of the types of challenges with which we are faced today. They each explain why and how Africa and Africans have largely been left out of the debates in IR and each in their own way describe both the folly of doing so as well as offer their version of a potential pathway toward a solution. While Taylor situates the issue by presenting a thorough analysis of where the discipline of IR stands in relation to the continent and how it got there, both Comaroff and Comaroff and Death provide building blocks from which to begin to answer the question of how to more adequately globalize the discipline to maintain its usefulness and relevance.

Throughout the arguments it often becomes tempting to toss by the wayside the existing international framework as well as doing away with notions of the state and sovereignty which have for so long remained inadequate in treating certain parts of the world and which seems to be disappearing in so many ways of their own accord. Death however, explains that "just as African states, hitherto neglected in debates over the green state, have a vital role to play, so developing states within the broader global south must be at the heart of green politics" (2016 p. 245). Through using the challenges

presented to global politics by climate change, Death uses the modern and hyper-globalized nature of this issue to open a path in which the Green African state, can be viewed as part of a larger assemblage of green states all of which operate under similar natural laws and have analogous goals and tools by which to attain them. Rather than Africa being viewed as a weak, 'other' version of a state then, this assemblage approach presents the qualities these states have rather than their shortcomings and it does so within existing paradigms, rather than trying to achieve what is likely impossible in reimaging a new world order treated by a wholly revolutionized IR.

The quote presented at the outset of this paper read at face value can be seen to suggest in its simplest terms that deforestation can lead to desertification and that, though some trees may seem worthless to individual Africans, their value is often much more than can be easily observed. This is similar to the major causes of environmental degradation as so often the price of pollution is not factored in to economic activity; but it is clear that there is always a price. Beyond this reading though this quote can be understood to represent the omission of Africa and the wider developing world into the discipline of IR as well as the international system more broadly. Often, this is done expressly as these places are seen to be 'failed' at worst, and virtually powerless and therefore meaningless at best. It is now more clear than ever however, that by not adequately treating these states, undesirable things can grow and fester in the neglected voids. Issues such as terrorism, environmental degradation, and conflict can proliferate and in the modern era of globalization in which states and boundaries have new understandings, no longer can these issues be kept localized but instead reverberations can be felt half a world away. These authors shed light on the importance of writing Africa and Africans into the scholarship, and as is demonstrated there are indeed ways to do that within existing frameworks. Thus, what is needed is not a revolution, simply a revolutionary approach in order to Africanize the state and globalize the discipline.

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