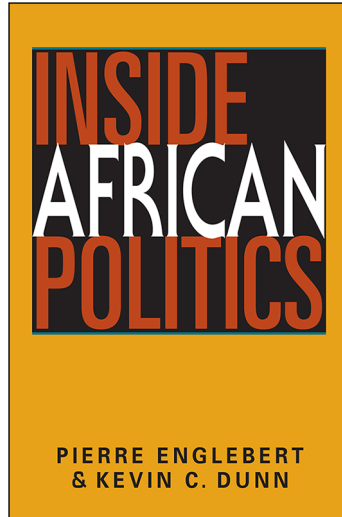


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Inside African Politics

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and Kevin C. Dunn

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1

Why Study African Politics?

NOT SO LONG AGO, AT A SMALL LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE'S FACULTY-trustee retreat in the United States, one of the trustees remarked: "Given our scarce resources, why should we teach Africa? This region isn't going anywhere. Our students would be better served if we focused on China, India, or other up-and-coming countries." Scholars of China and India might agree. For the student of Africa, however, this is a familiar putdown. The continent sometimes seems to define marginality, and its study is often relegated to the periphery of knowledge about the world.

There is no point bemoaning this situation, for the relative neglect of Africa is easy to understand. After all, in most regions of the world, geographical proximity, historical affinity, direct relevance, and available expertise largely determine what gets taught. Africa's marginal status tends, therefore, to endure. And yet, one can think of several answers to give our trustee. Since you are reading this book, you might already be convinced of the utility of studying African politics. It might still be worthwhile, at the onset of this exploration, to think of how the study of African politics fits with the study of politics and of world affairs in general. Such an exercise should not be understood as a mere matter of self-motivation. Instead, it serves as a reminder of the universality of human experiences and of the sometimes hidden relevance of even the most marginal of regions to our own concerns, wherever we may be.

A first way to answer our trustee might be to embrace his perspective. If Africa is indeed "going nowhere," it would still be important to find out why and with what consequences. It might be only one perspective among others, but thinking of Africa as a region of political and economic problems is far from entirely inaccurate. It is common at the onset of African politics textbooks to warn students against stereotypes of a continent plagued with corruption, conflict, poverty, and famines. But Africa *is* a continent plagued with corruption, conflict, poverty, and famines. It is many

other things too, but there is no point denying the breadth and depth of its problems. Understanding these problems, if only to mitigate their possible consequences on countries elsewhere, is a perfectly legitimate motivation for the acquisition of knowledge. Americans no longer need to be told how issues intrinsic to societies of the Middle East have greatly affected their own political systems. They might want to seek to help solve Africa's problems before these too "blow up in their faces." Europeans, facing high levels of migration from Africa, already experience some consequences of Africa's predicaments. Thus, anyone interested in the welfare and security of their own political system would be well inspired to gain knowledge on the functioning of African political systems.

It is more common, however, at least among students in North America and Europe, to be interested in the study of Africa with a view toward helping solve its problems for Africans' sake. From this perspective, Africa may not be seen as "going nowhere," but it is also characterized by some sort of generalized crisis status: Africans face serious problems and they need help. Taking this view to its extreme, Africa seems in need of being "saved." One can of course wonder what it needs to be saved from, whether salvation is even possible, and particularly whether frequently young and inexperienced outsiders are in any way qualified to save it. But this is all easy criticism. Seeking to understand Africa's problems with a view to helping solve them is a generous and altruistic calling and constitutes perfectly sufficient motivation to embark upon the study of the continent.

One is unlikely to do much good, however, without a decent understanding of some of the roots of the problem one is trying to solve. Responding to famines by sending food aid is likely to provide some relief to those affected, but solving the problem requires understanding why, after more than fifty years of self-rule, some African governments still regularly appear unable or unwilling to provide the most basic safety nets for their populations. Helping a village by building a school is likely to be cheered by the villagers, but improving educational opportunities for African children requires understanding why such public investment has not been forthcoming in the first place, where resources have gone instead, what the social expectations of the benefits of access to education are, and so forth. Campaigning against sexual violence in conflicts might help mobilize resources for the victims, but finding ways to stop or discourage the practice demands at least understanding the logic of conflicts characterized by decentralized violence, the nature of civilian-military relations, and the goals of the belligerents (Baaz and Stern 2013).

The necessity of knowledge for action is not only true of humanitarian and charitable intervention; it also applies to policymaking at large. Studying African politics with a view to improving policy toward Africa should be well worth the effort. The gap that exists between the relative wealth of

our knowledge on how contemporary African states and societies function and the assumptions underlying international policies and foreign aid toward the region is large indeed. Over and over again, one is confronted with analyses of African politics that rely on disembedded assumptions. It seems that to end corruption, for example, one need merely elect a new ruler of personal integrity or appoint a corruption czar (Wrong 2010). The very understanding of African corruption as the consequence of the greed of elites or as a way for impoverished civil servants to deal with their predicament fails to grasp its centrality in African political systems. Similarly, rebuilding states in the wake of conflicts is often seen as only requiring large financial commitments from donors, new constitutions inspired from Western models, and committed leadership. That the international reconstruction partners were also those who colonized and thus created those failed states in the first place, that previous Western-inspired constitutions met with little success, and that the former belligerents often in large part also make up the postconflict leadership represent obstacles not easily overcome and usually glossed over in policy design (Englebert and Tull 2008). In fact, one can argue that a large number of Western and international policies in Africa have failed for a lack of proper understanding of the mechanisms of African politics and the rationales of their politicians (Tull 2011). People in the policy world can thus expect a significant payoff from a better understanding of African politics.

One can also challenge our trustee's assumption of Africa's marginality head-on. There are, indeed, many ways in which the African continent is central to the concerns and interests of people in other regions, including Europe and North America. For example, as of 2012, Nigeria was the sixth largest provider of crude petroleum to the United States, and Angola the ninth. In 2011, foreign direct investments to Africa totaled \$80 billion (Ernst and Young 2012), their largest volume ever. Five of the world's ten fastest-growing economies in 2011 were African (Ghana, Liberia, Angola, Ethiopia, and Mozambique). Bilateral trade between China and Africa amounted to some \$160 billion in 2011, and more than a million Chinese live and work in Africa. Militarily too, Africa lies centrally on the radars of foreign powers. The United States has a military command for Africa (known as AFRICOM), a permanent base in Djibouti, and military missions deployed in several African countries. France has permanent military bases in Djibouti, Gabon, and Senegal, and missions in Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, and the Central African Republic. In 2013, France deployed some 4,000 troops to fight insurgents in Mali, believed to be associated with broader international networks of Islamic fundamentalism. Investing knowledge in the political systems and societies of African countries would of course be a worthwhile exercise for anyone intent on understanding or managing these important relationships.

There are also unusual rewards to the study of African politics for the more academically minded, those interested in political science and particularly comparative politics. Of course, knowledge about African politics is its own reward for anyone directly interested in the region. But even if Africa is not your priority, studying its politics can provide important insights of fairly universal scope, in at least two ways. First, the study of African politics addresses broad, complex, and fundamental questions, going to the core of the discipline of political science. For example, the African experience informs us about the relationship between state formation and political violence. It brings to life, in all their richness and complexity, problems of political legitimacy and social contracts in heterogeneous societies, and their relationship to phenomena like patronage. The African experience is also a vibrant laboratory of political identity. And it provides insights into the roots of democracy and authoritarianism and the challenges of development.

Thus Somalia might seem like a hell hole to many, but it is also a crucible of politics. Nigeria might be best known for its corruption, but it is also a miracle of national integration (and the two issues are not unrelated). Eastern Congo might be wracked with political violence, but it also bears deep insights into the relation between land, power, and ethnicity; while neighboring Rwanda, which lives with the legacy of genocide, is also a unique experiment in identity transformation. Benin and Togo might not be known for much, but they provide stunningly contrasting experiences in democratization and reversal to authoritarianism. The list goes on. To study African politics is to learn from the ongoing experiences of Africans with these questions of universal relevance.

Second, and related, the study of African politics is also fascinating for all the ways in which the African experience deviates from patterns in other regions or from what established theories predict. To a significant extent, the study of comparative politics and international relations has historically developed by incorporating materials from regions other than Africa (Dunn and Shaw 2001; Lemke 2003). In part, this came as a result of an occasional perception among non-Africanist scholars that African politics was a matter of regional or area studies rather than bona fide comparative politics.¹ As a result, both comparative politics and international relations theory have been somewhat biased and, not surprisingly, have done a poor job at times of explaining empirical features of African politics. In other words, the political scientist's conventional toolbox has been incomplete when it comes to Africa, the study of which leads one to challenge notions, concepts, and theories developed in other contexts, and makes comparative politics better (it is now Africa that saves *us* from our relative ignorance).

Only recently has the African experience more fully contributed to the development of comparative politics and international relations. To some extent, empirical trends since the late 1980s, characterized both by the

decay and failure of many African states and by widespread political and economic change across the region, have removed Africa from its relative marginality in theory development. Should Richard Sklar (1993) rewrite today the article he wrote in the early 1990s, "The African Frontier for Political Science," he undoubtedly would reap a greater harvest than Africanism's contributions to the study of dual authority, cultural relativism, and mixed methodologies. African studies have contributed to theory development in the fields of democratic theory (e.g., Bratton and van de Walle 1997), rationality and culture (e.g., Bates 1983; Schatzberg 2001), economic development and modernization (e.g., Bates 1981; Chabal and Daloz 1999; and a large body of empirical and theoretical literature on growth), state theory (e.g., Bayart 1993; Young 1994a, 2012), class analysis (e.g., Sklar 1979; Boone 1990; Samatar and Oldfield 1995), ethnic politics (Bates 1983; Posner 2005; and many more), civil wars and ethnic conflicts (e.g., Reno 1995; Clapham 1998a; Bøås and Dunn 2007; Williams 2011), governance and political corruption (e.g., Olivier de Sardan 1999; Smith 2007), international relations (Clapham 1996; Bayart 2000; Dunn 2001; Lemke 2003; Cornelissen, Cheru, and Shaw 2012), and more.

There will be ample opportunities to return to these contributions later, but a few examples might be helpful at this stage. Some of the most influential work to come out of African studies has been that of Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle (1994, 1997). They showed that conventional theories of democratic transitions that stressed the role of negotiated top-down settlements, honed in the experience of Latin America and southern Europe (e.g., O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986), failed to explain African transition patterns. They argued instead that to understand African transitions, one had to take into account the nature and structural characteristics of the previous regime and the role of protests. Since then, their insights have become part of the democratization canon and informed the study of transitions in other regions too (e.g., Linz and Stepan 1996; Schedler 2006).

Robert Bates provides another example. In a 1983 article, he highlighted how conventional modernization theory could not account for the growing influence of ethnicity over time in African politics. To solve this puzzle, he offered a new concept of ethnic coalitions and a broad theory of rational policy preferences. His earlier work (Bates 1981), explaining the paradox of why African policymakers seem to make systematically bad economic policy choices, has become a classic of rational choice theory (a methodological disposition to which we return in Chapter 3). Similarly, Richard Sklar (1979) argued that class analysis was not helpful in making sense of African politics unless classes were defined in their relation to the state rather than to the means of production, and unless their behavior was extended beyond class struggle, both heterodox views that nudged this analytical tradition beyond its Marxian roots. And Douglas Lemke's (2002)

evidence that conventional theories of war failed to explain the significantly lower probability of interstate conflict on the continent led him to reconsider what constitutes international relations and what actors should be included in its study in order to make sense of the contemporary world across regions. Here too the list goes on.

To study Africa is thus to expose oneself to conditions that challenge established theories of comparative and international politics and, thereby, to enrich both these disciplines and one's grasp of them. By surveying and explaining these many theoretical developments, and putting them into their empirical contexts, we hope this textbook will help the student make sense of this rich body of work.

The Object of Inquiry: An Overview

What is it about African politics that we seek to explain? What questions drive our inquiry? At the most elementary level, we want to know how politics is organized on the continent, how things work, how political institutions and behavior in Africa vary from those in other regions and within Africa itself. At the core of such inquiry lies the state. African states are generally deemed to be weak, fragile, and sometimes even failed, yet they are also very good at surviving and retaining significance for their citizens. Despite their ambiguous colonial origins and sometimes hesitant territorial reach, they have evolved, adapted, and been appropriated by Africans. In their own ways, they “work” (Chabal and Daloz 1999). Although the state is the core unit of African politics, it is one of the areas where the knowledge gap between scholarship and policy practice is the widest. Donors insist on state stability, capacity, democratization, and decentralization. Yet they often seem unaware of how these states actually function beyond their formal institutional surface (Trefon 2011a). Therefore, we begin this book with an in-depth discussion of the African state (Chapter 2), including its precolonial and colonial origins; the process of decolonization, the transfer of statehood to Africans, and the degree to which the state was appropriated by Africans at independence; the very notion of African sovereignty; and how the African state compares to states elsewhere and to what states are theoretically supposed to be and do.

Politics also largely takes place outside the state, in the realm of society and at the level of individuals (Chapter 3). Particularly important in this sphere are issues of identity and their political salience. And, of course, it is not possible to speak of identity in Africa without discussing ethnicity. Here too, however, the gap between prejudice and scholarship is wide. Africans are nearly universally seen (including by many Africans themselves) as privileging ethnic (or “tribal”) identity over other forms of collective characteristics.

Many problems, from corruption to conflict, tend to be attributed to ethnic polarization. The reality is formidably more complex. Yet there is no denying that ethnicity, in all its ambiguity, lies center-stage in African politics. We take great effort to discuss it in depth and nuance, highlighting both its relevance and its propensity to offer misleading explanations. We explore the different ways to conceptualize ethnic identity, from primordial ties of blood to coalitions based on political expediency; look at the connection between ethnic and national identity, including the more recent development of political discourses of autochthony that link ethnicity with soil; and discuss the tendency of many regimes to repress, and of others to accommodate, ethnic identity. In each case we look at the explanatory power of different approaches to make sense of actual empirical conditions in Africa, from peaceful cohabitation to genocide.

Yet for all the attention it receives, ethnicity is far from being the only dimension of collective action or social cleavage in Africa. For one, religion has gained much momentum as a political force across the continent (as elsewhere). Christian faiths, particularly of the Pentecostal type, have made great inroads and manifested a new political assertiveness. African Islam too, while not gaining as many new converts as the Christian faiths, has been in ebullition, partly caught between worldwide trends and home-grown practices. In addition, despite the penetration of world religions on the continent, spiritual and religious beliefs that are specifically African have continued to thrive and occasionally show deep political significance. In this respect, the practice of witchcraft merits our attention.

Social class, although it might no longer be the most popular mode of political analysis and rarely manifests itself in obvious ways in African politics, nevertheless remains a significant dimension of collective action on the continent. Yet because of the historical weakness of many African economies, classes often need to be conceptualized in different ways than they might be elsewhere in order to yield analytical mileage. We discuss class theories of African politics and suggest ways in which they can help explain some empirical patterns. We also focus on gender. In Africa as in other regions, gender differences and inequalities based on sex matter a great deal. In many dimensions of life, African women are at a significant material disadvantage compared to men. We discuss this and the ways in which African women organize and seek political representation.

Finally, there is a remarkable wealth of associative life outside the state in Africa. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are a very popular form of association. Their activity belongs to civil society, the realm of public life between the household and the state. The concept of civil society in comparative politics is both useful and constraining. Rather Western-centric in its historical origins and normative expectations, it travels with difficulty to Africa. Yet it is invoked widely by scholars, donors, and African activists

alike. We look at its definitions and expected functions, its usefulness and limitations in the context of African politics, and the ways in which some scholars have suggested amending the concept for it to better reflect African realities (one example of the contributions of Africanist scholarship to broader comparative analysis).

Having laid the historical stage to the state and provided an overview of social forces and cleavages, we turn to how power is actually exercised (Chapter 4). The exogenous origins of African states have combined with precolonial patterns of rule and problems of social heterogeneity to produce a peculiar type of rule that has dominated across the continent since independence. Because it mixes elements of formal institutionalized statehood with more informal and personalized dimensions, it is commonly referred to as neopatrimonialism. Understanding neopatrimonialism might be one of the most important steps in acquiring knowledge about African politics. It illuminates numerous practices and patterns, from the personalization of power, to the weakness of institutions, to the prevalence of corruption. At the same time, neopatrimonialism has its limitations as a paradigm of African politics, particularly as it does a poor job of accounting for differences of rule among countries and because its very ubiquity has diluted its conceptual rigor over time.

We also discuss the functioning of formal institutions associated with the exercise of power. First is political parties. Current African political parties differ greatly from their predecessors in the pre-1990 era of single parties and independence movements. In addition, their lack of clear ideological differentiation and of institutionalization makes them very different from parties in many other regions of the world. Next we discuss the political salience of African militaries, which have a long-standing tradition of wresting power away from civilians. We review the empirical record of coups d'état, discuss theories of military takeovers, and paint the profile of military governments. Finally we discuss the functioning of state institutions, paying particular attention to executives and administrations, legislative bodies, and judiciaries. These are areas that have only recently gained more prominence among scholarship on Africa, which has tended to focus on the very top of the state.

Formal state institutions are only part of the story of rule in Africa, however. Formal and informal institutions coexist and mesh as people straddle different worlds. French political scientist Emmanuel Terray (1986) has referred to this duality with the dichotomy of the "air conditioner" and the "veranda," two legitimating spheres with different behavioral expectations in and across which African individuals and politics function. With this important empirical pattern in mind, we dedicate significant space to the study of institutional pluralism—the hybridity of African politics and the shared nature of its governance, which is effectively performed not only by the

state, but also by customary authorities (many of which are also, paradoxically, state actors), associations, religious groups, and foreign donors. Thus we go beyond the study of formal institutions and look at the effective existence of authority and governance on the ground, at the ways in which politics surfaces within the social spheres, and at the overlapping and intertwining of the formal and the informal.

The study of political regimes is, of course, one of the most common preoccupations of comparative politics, and we dedicate a chapter to it (Chapter 5). We discuss the authoritarian tendencies of African regimes before the 1990s, the democratic wave that followed the end of the Cold War, the consolidation of democracy in some states and the reversal to authoritarianism in many others, and the particular contribution of African politics to regime typology: the hybrid regime, which blends elements of democracy, such as relative media freedoms and the right to organize political parties, with features of authoritarianism, such as unfree and unfair elections, repression of opponents, manipulation of constitutions, and the like. A particularly interesting feature of African hybrid regimes is that, while harboring features usually associated with transitions to democracy, they are actually stable.

Politics is exercised everywhere within a material world that constrains it. Resource scarcity is an important conditioner of African politics. The relatively widespread prevalence of poverty across the continent colors the nature of people's participation in politics and the exercise of state power. At the same time that many Africans are poor, many African countries are rich in natural resources, which also greatly affect political institutions and behavior. Thus this book allocates considerable space to the study of Africa's political economy (Chapter 6). It discusses the unusual historical, climatic, geographical, and resource-based constraints of African economies; the burden and political effects of epidemics like AIDS; and the management of African economies by governments and donors. In this respect, the impact of neopatrimonialism on economic policies gets much attention, as do the intended remedies for economic failure, including the multiple iterations of donor-sponsored programs for economic reform. We conclude this political economy survey with a discussion of the improved performance of many African economies since the late 1990s, a subject that has produced a lively debate among scholars of development.

While economic crisis is a common African narrative, so are conflict and state failure. And indeed, no amount of "Afro-optimism" will conceal the fact that African countries are prone to conflict, even though most African societies live in peace most of the time. Given the importance and policy relevance of this topic, we dedicate a large chapter to it (Chapter 7). We help the reader make sense of what often appear to be irrational instances of political violence. Who are the insurgents? What do they want?

What do they do? How do they relate to the state, to their environment and resources, and to foreign actors? We are careful to connect these questions to our earlier discussions of state, social forces, economic resources, and forms of governance. We discuss national liberation wars, interstate wars, secessions, nonseparatist rebellions, and composite conflicts. We also show how conflict has evolved over time in Africa, especially before and after the Cold War. We then review the rich body of literature that deals with the causes of conflict and apply it to cases from across the continent. Here too, the study of Africa has much to teach us and greatly contributes to the existing literature. The chapter concludes with a discussion of conflict resolution and of the notions of human security and insecurity in Africa.

We conclude the book with a discussion of the international relations of African states (Chapter 8). The frequent perception of African states as passive recipients of foreign interventions, from colonialism to humanitarian aid, is largely misleading. However dependent they might appear, they have considerable agency and their rulers often use their situation of weakness to their advantage. We begin by reviewing theoretical perspectives on Africa in the world and the contributions these studies have made to international relations theory in general. We then provide a historical overview of the foreign relations of African states, from colonialism to the post-Cold War era. Particularly interesting are the specific current relations of African countries among themselves and with the dominant actors outside the continent. Among the former, we emphasize dynamics of regional integration and collective action within the African Union and its predecessor, the Organization of African Unity. Among the latter, we stress relations with former colonial powers and with the United States, among other countries. In many ways, this chapter will challenge the presumptions of Africa's marginality that underpinned our trustee's earlier comment.

Our goal is not only to provide a conceptual overview of African politics but also to help the reader understand the roots of some persistent problems that undermine the quality of life of Africans and have been begging for policy solutions for several decades. Problems such as underdevelopment, poverty, and inequality; violence, conflict, and the breakdown of state structures; authoritarianism, institutional weakness, and political instability; poor governance and widespread corruption; and debt and uneven relations with donors provide focus to our inquiry across chapters.

We also seek to make sense of change. Although there is little point in denying that many Africans face significant political and economic problems, theirs is a continent of rapid and discontinuous change, with trends and dynamics that call for analysis. Why did many countries democratize in the 1990s and how did democracy evolve afterward? How have some countries collapsed and/or recovered over time? What explains variations in economic performance from decade to decade? Change is not just something we

need to explain; it is something that permanently challenges what we are explaining or have already explained. Thus the elaboration of neopatrimonial theory does a great job of making sense of the African state until the 1990s, but then runs into some problems. The story of decay that characterizes Africa from the late 1980s onward—that of state failure, collapse, conflict, and ethnic wars, and which has generated a large body of thoughtful literature—finds itself again in question after the turn of the twenty-first century, when Africa seemed to embark upon a new turn, with greater growth and the end of several conflicts. However trite the transition paradigm, Africa is undoubtedly undergoing a transition. In some ways, as with the apparent development of an African middle class, this transformation is potentially profound. In other ways, to the extent, for example, that this development reflects a mere commodity boom, it might not be so dramatic. At any rate, accounting for change in the short run is a challenge. We touch upon it but place it in the broader context of more than five decades of post-colonial politics and economics. We focus on analytical and theoretical insights in the hope that the reader will acquire the analytical skill to make sense both of past trends and of developments new and yet to come.

Africa?

This book starts from the premise that there is such a thing as African politics and therefore such a thing as Africa. The subsuming of continent-wide trends and events into a shared conceptual framework can be a stretch, and we do not wish to contribute to the occasional misconception of Africa as a country. There are immense variations in political systems (from Benin's democracy to Eritrea's dictatorship), societal trends (from Tanzania's sense of unity to Rwanda's intense polarization), and economic fortunes (from Botswana's miracle to Zimbabwe's catastrophic decline) across the continent. Some of these are visible to the naked eye. African countries have shopping malls, air-conditioned high-rises, widespread cell phone usage, countless television and radio stations, Internet cafés, and bustling metropolises choked with traffic. At the same time, and often in the same countries, there are entire neighborhoods without water, sewers, or electricity; internally displaced people and refugees living in camps; malnourished and uneducated children; disconnected villages living largely in self-subsistence (or falling short of it); and societies at war with themselves.

Seeing African politics as a conceptual whole does not preclude recognizing such variations. Our first goal is to highlight shared patterns across the region and develop concepts and theories that can help the reader make sense of African politics in general, for African states and societies do share many circumstances, whether embedded in history, nature, or society. Yet,

it is also our goal to explain the variety of settings, conditions, and outcomes that exist on the continent. In fact, we find these variations to be an intrinsic component of African politics, and most theories are able to account for them. Moreover, as this book will make clear, hybridity is an essential characteristic of many dimensions of African politics and economies. As a result, the empirical diversity of the continent need not be an obstacle to its holistic study, for there is much to be learned from observing and understanding variations among and within African countries.

There is also much to be learned from the diversity of perspectives in scholarship on Africa. People study African politics not only from different personal, ideological, and methodological perspectives, but also from diverse disciplines including political science, history, economics, sociology, and anthropology. Our approach is to discuss good scholarship and interesting ideas, wherever they come from. While we seek all points of view, we generally do not care about the origins and personal characteristics of the authors we study. Nor do we believe that the study of Africa requires “pro-African” attitudes or “the championship of Africa’s interests in all their ramifications” (Owomoyela 1994:77, 95). Such an approach does not strike us as likely to produce reliable knowledge, and we are not sure what these attitudes or interests might actually be. At the same time, we do not mean to dismiss the concerns of “Afrocentricity,” in the sense given to it by Richard Sklar (1993) as a form of cultural relativism that puts at the center of inquiry issues that are of concern to Africans themselves and not only or necessarily to outside observers. Our first goal remains to help students, wherever they might be, understand African politics. Such understanding might require non-African students to learn things that are of importance to Africans, even if such topics did not originally strike them as important. Thus, while we study issues such as corruption, which might sometimes be of greater concern to outsiders than to Africans, we also discuss policies devised by African regimes to deal with cultural heterogeneity or to produce political legitimacy, which might be of greater concern to Africans than to outsiders. Most of the time, we find the distinction moot, but we remain attentive to reining in whatever Western bias we might have.

Although we act largely in this textbook as data organizers by inventorying, categorizing, comparing, and contrasting existing knowledge, one might be legitimately concerned that our own perspectives, as US scholars, could bias our analysis. One could wonder whether thinking of African politics as someone else’s politics does justice to the topic or reduces our understanding of it. To some extent, the extraneity of the topic is unavoidable and similar to what it would be for a textbook on European politics or, for that matter, on astronomy (although we at least go to Africa, whereas few astronomers go to space). There might be ways to study African politics that would be reductionist. If we were, for example, to impute all political patterns that

are unusual to Western eyes to some forms of local “tradition” or “culture,” we would cheat ourselves of decent knowledge and run the risk of being injurious to many Africans. Avoiding this trap is not as easily done as said, for there is no denying the exotic appeal Africa can exert on Western minds. Think of the stereotypical Maasai “warriors,” polygamous customary chiefs, extravagant dictators, and other clichés from the “heart of darkness” (Conrad 1990 [1902]). Yet Africa can be an object of scholarly inquiry without resorting to these shortcuts. We agree with the call of several scholars for considering the “banality” of African politics (e.g., Bayart 1993; Coulon 1997), although we do not want this to undermine any legitimate excitement that the study of the continent might trigger. In other words, Africans are very much the same as people anywhere else. They are born, most go to school, they work, they seek some degree of welfare, and they all eventually die. By the same token, African politics is also the same as politics anywhere else. Africans vote, compete for scarce resources, display political preferences, feel and express sentiments of national and regional allegiances, revolt, and so forth. It is important to ground our study of African politics in this understanding. It need not prevent us, however, from acknowledging that African lives are also different in many ways from those of people elsewhere. Once born, a greater proportion of Africans than people on any other continent never get a chance to live. Fewer also go to school. Many cannot find sufficient employment for survival. As a result, the welfare they long for often eludes them. And most of them die much earlier than people elsewhere. By the same token, African politics also differs from politics elsewhere. There are fewer democracies, more conflicts, and more coups; states are less functional, with greater reliance on primary commodity production; politics is more informal. These differences need not imply any intrinsic difference about people. We subscribe to this point of view and, when trying to explain any specific phenomenon, make similar assumptions about Africans as we would about people in the United States or elsewhere. We assume people are fairly rational, that they pursue some degree of self-interest, that they care about their families, that they seek security and predictability. In doing so, however, they face different sets of constraints and possibilities, different realms of the “politically thinkable” (Schatzberg 2001), than do people in the Western world. These differences, the origins of which we discuss, account in part for different politics.

And what about issues of method? The study of African politics has been mired in questions of methods that also relate to the identity of the region. Some scholars have stressed that we should think of African politics as African first, and gain knowledge of the continent’s or of its countries’ uniqueness (see Dressel 1966; Zeleza 1997; Szanton 2004). These scholars have insisted on the importance of specialized knowledge of countries, on the elaboration of concepts and theories that are useful to make sense of

Africa for its own sake, and on being cognizant of specific cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts. They tend, as a result, to offer detailed discussions of specific case studies, but do not necessarily relate them to broader, more universal theoretical questions or discussions. In addition, they are more likely to cut across disciplines while focusing on Africa alone (in contrast to focusing on political science alone and comparing multiple regions). The rise of African Studies centers in Western universities largely embodies this approach.

Others have argued that comparative politics should be of universal relevance and that similar tools should be applied across regions, irrespective of local characteristics. From this perspective, politics in the United States, France, India, and Zambia can be best understood if studied along similar axes. In other words, an explanation that is only regional falls short of being a *bona fide* explanation. Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba (1994) make the case for universalist methods in comparative politics. Rational choice theory takes this argument a step further by suggesting that the rational maximization of self-interest by individuals is the best behavioral assumption to make sense of politics around the world (see Lichbach and Zuckerman 2009 for a more thorough discussion and comparison to other approaches).

This methodological dispute has raged in the study of all regions, not just Africa. It is far from merely academic and it has divided entire university departments in sometimes acrimonious battles, as resources were reshuffled away from area studies in the wake of the Cold War, when there was suddenly less of a national security interest in knowing about other regions and cultures (Bates 1997). It should be clear from our introduction that we believe in the universality of African politics and in the contributions that the study of the continent can also make to political science in general. We think African politics should be studied like politics elsewhere. At the same time, we do not think such study is possible without a grounded knowledge of the region, gained in part from fieldwork and from learning about local histories and cultures. We therefore find the distinction between area studies and rational choice or other universal methods to be unnecessarily divisive. We agree instead with Ron Kassimir (1997:156) that “local knowledge and global knowledge are inseparable and mutually constitutive.”² And we think students would be ill inspired not to fill their analytical toolboxes with as many tools as possible.

One last qualification before we move on to more substantive concerns. This is a book about African politics, but it does not deal with all of the continent’s fifty-four countries. Our focus is the forty-nine states of sub-Saharan Africa (see the Appendix on pp. 379–383). We do not discuss the politics of Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, or Tunisia, which are commonly studied with the “Arab world” or together with Middle Eastern countries.

This segregation is due partly to historical patterns of knowledge distribution in academia—some of it idiosyncratic—and partly to substantive differences in the politics of these two regions. Because of the limitations of our training and experience, we do not challenge the tradition of studying sub-Saharan Africa separately from North Africa. It is worth noting, however, that there are some remarkable exceptions to this approach, not least Crawford Young's (2012) *The Postcolonial State in Africa*.

Finally, a word about student level. This textbook provides a systematic introduction to African politics south of the Sahara. Its use requires little prior knowledge. However, it does not present information on the basic facts of Africa and its countries, which is easily available from many other sources (e.g., Griffiths 1995; *Africa South of the Sahara* 2013, 2012; CIA 2013), and it is probably best suited to students with some basic knowledge of political science, particularly comparative politics. We also hope that the book will be a companion for further study and act as a work of reference. For each topic, it reviews a range of theories and arguments, comparing and contrasting the most important contributions in the field, and singling out their implications for policy or for further study. Thus, more advanced undergraduate and graduate students, as well as policymakers and other professionals who focus on Africa, might also find the material here of interest and of assistance in their work.

Notes

1. The view of Africanist scholarship as parochial was contested by James Coleman and C. R. D. Halisi (1983:45), who noted that most Africanist works of the first two decades of independence actually mixed local knowledge with broader theory.

2. For more on this controversy, see the 1997 special issue of *Africa Today* and the 2005 special issue of *Africa Spectrum*. See also Bates, Mudimbe, and O'Barr 1993.