

WORLD POLITICAL THEORIES



# AFRICA

*The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*

Patrick Chabal

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# AFRICA

The politics of suffering and smiling

PATRICK CHABAL

Zed Books

LONDON & NEW YORK

University of KwaZulu–Natal Press

PIETERMARITZBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

'Shuffering and Shmiling' is the actual title of  
Fela Ransom Kuti's famous song of 1978

*Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling* was first published in 2009 by:

in southern Africa, University of KwaZulu–Natal Press,  
Private Bag 201, Scottsville 3209, South Africa  
[www.ukznpress.co.za](http://www.ukznpress.co.za)

in the rest of the world, Zed Books Ltd, 7 Cynthia Street, London N1 9JE, UK  
and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA  
[www.zedbooks.co.uk](http://www.zedbooks.co.uk)

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Designed and typeset in Monotype Joanna by illuminati, Grosmont,  
[www.illuminatibooks.co.uk](http://www.illuminatibooks.co.uk)

Cover designed by Lucy Morton @ illuminati

Printed and bound in the EU by Gutenberg Press Ltd

Distributed in the USA exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan,  
a division of St Martin's Press, LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library  
Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data available

ISBN 978 1 84277 908 8 Hb (Zed Books)

ISBN 978 1 84277 909 5 Pb (Zed Books)

ISBN 978 1 86914 163 9 (University of KwaZulu–Natal Press)

For Farzana and Emile



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## Preface

This book is an attempt to tackle post-colonial politics in Africa from a different angle. Different in that it does not focus on the standard questions of comparative politics: state, civil society, elites, political economy, ethnicity, development, corruption, international relations, and so on. It tries instead to get at the stuff of politics from below, or rather from within. Of course, this is a tall order. These are not questions that can be answered 'objectively', once and for all. There is a very strong personal and subjective aspect to my enterprise, as there is for all those who study Africa. But there is also a very pragmatic side: put at its simplest, does my analysis of African post-colonial politics provide new insights?

The choice of topics discussed in the book's seven chapters draws on my reading of the situation on the ground today and my reading of the material offered to explain that situation. Under the guise of a survey of those aspects of life that affect most people most of the time, I offer a plan of work that captures some of the key aspects of contemporary African societies. I recognise that others might have made a different choice. This is merely my current ordering of what I think matters. But there is logic to the structure of the book.

The chapters are meant to capture the cycle of individual and communal lives, from birth to death, and to give importance to those areas I believe to be of greatest importance in today's Africa. This is not, therefore, a general blueprint for the study of politics in Africa. It is a contextually drawn framework for the study of some of the most relevant questions about power. Nor am I making any claim for its continued relevance over time. It may be that in a decade or two it will be necessary to ask different questions and to provide distinct conceptual orderings. This is very much how it should be.

For now, let me explain why I have organised the book in this way. My primary concern has been to devise a scheme that would not be *driven*, either theoretically or conceptually, by the standard methodologies applied to African politics. Not because they are without merit but simply because I think they have reached their limits – by which I mean that they are no longer telling us anything new. We need to try to think afresh. So the idea here is to get at politics indirectly, through an investigation of how it is played out in these key areas of human existence.

Stepping out of the field of comparative politics has forced me onto other terrains, other disciplines, most notably anthropology. I make no apology for this but I do recognise that it implies different agendas and brings with it other constraints. If I find the anthropological angle useful it is because it compels me to re-examine familiar issues through a different lens. But there is also much of interest in culture, literature and religious studies, which I have used extensively.

This does not mean I neglect other approaches in the social sciences. For example, I am not arguing that studying Africa's place in the current world economic system is superfluous. On the contrary. But there is today a vast literature on such questions as international political economy and globalisation – from which the student of Africa can choose the most plausible approach. Here, however, I link the analysis of the economy to outside factors *only* as they play themselves out in the everyday lives of African men and women. I leave the bigger picture to others.

My second objective has been to offer an interpretation of African politics that worked my 'subjective' readings into a coherent analytical whole – or, to put it another way, that made my standpoint readable. By choosing an unorthodox approach, I have made it easier both to assess and to contest it. I happen to believe my approach helps us to get closer to an understanding of politics in Africa but I want to invite discussion of its limitations. Since in the social sciences the advancement of knowledge is both incremental and disorderly, my method should facilitate constructive debate. My hope, therefore, is that this book will be measured by how insightful an account it provides of actual politics – not how it stands against pre-set theories.

Lastly, my intention has been to bring back people into politics. There is nothing wrong with big questions and the study of causalities, but we tend easily to forget human beings in our sociological enquiries and regression analyses. I want here to fix my camera at eye level and engage with politics as it is played out in everyday life. I have eschewed the macro for the micro, the high for the low, and the elite for the ordinary. Ideally, I would like to answer the question of what politics means for people who are not political actors. This is probably beyond the competence of any one individual, especially an outsider. But I hope the attempt to address that question can make a difference to our understanding of contemporary African societies.

Let me make two final remarks. First, I shall refer in the following chapters to the current literature on African politics *only* as required. Thus, the book does not attempt to present a representative summary of existing Africanist political science, which is extensive. It will instead engage critically with the present corpus, as appropriate.<sup>1</sup> In my view, there is little to be gained by making claims of superiority in this respect. What matters is to explain why certain arguments are more plausible than others and why. Second, throughout the

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1. I have deliberately omitted footnotes, except where indispensable. Instead, the bibliography provides reference to some of the literature I have found useful. However, this bibliography is neither exhaustive nor intended to be representative of any particular Africanist discipline.

book I shall refer to Africanists, by which I mean both African and non-African students of Africa. If I speak more systematically of Western Africanists it is merely because I am one. But the book is intended as a dialogue with our African colleagues, whether they agree with my approach or not. The point is not artificially to agree or disagree but to engage in meaningful and critical discussion, which I wholeheartedly invite.

I want to thank Ellen Hallsworth, who encouraged me to write this book. I should like to acknowledge the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, which offered me membership during the academic year 2006–07 and provided the most extraordinarily agreeable setting for the reading and thinking that went into the book. Here, I would like especially to record my debt of gratitude to Clifford Geertz, who sadly died whilst I was in residence, and to Joan Scott, who responded generously to my somewhat unreasonable requests for feedback. I am also particularly grateful to David Scott for coruscating intellectual debate; although we may not always have found agreement, he forced me to think harder and pushed me to be sharper. I should like to give warm thanks to John Lonsdale, for continued critical support, and to Miguel Cabrera for a most productive academic dialogue. I thank Steven Feierman and Sandra Barnes for friendship, support and wisdom. I also learnt a great deal during my conversations with Herman Bennett, Karen Blu, Kristen Ghodsee, Rosalind Morris, Jennifer Pitts, Benjamin Schmidt and Lisa Wedeen. As ever, I am grateful to my departmental colleagues for providing a congenial atmosphere particularly conducive to research. Finally, I should like to thank the London School of Economics for asking me to give the Obi Igwara Memorial Lecture, in which I presented a book chapter that was followed by a fruitful discussion. But I owe most to Farzana and Emile, to whom this book is dedicated, since they brought meaning, humanity and insight to what I was doing.

## Introduction

The attempt to write a political theory of Africa immediately faces two intractable issues. The first has to do with the question of what a political theory of any particular region of the world might mean. The second is linked to the fact that this region of the world happens to be Africa. I will address these two questions systematically throughout the book but I begin with a short general discussion.

Pleasant as it would be to believe that these issues could be tackled in a broadly consensual way, the fact is that the study of African politics is deeply contentious. This is not just because there is no agreement on what might constitute the key questions that need answering but also, and perhaps primarily, because the political analysis of the continent arouses strong emotions, which often have little to do with the matter at hand. In some strange ways the study of Africa often appears *sui generis* or uniquely different, an issue it is useful to confront squarely from the outset.

Here I want merely to stress the fact that it is well nigh impossible to discuss African politics without venturing onto the difficult terrain of normative and personal considerations. Africans and Africanists are often locked into a world of shadow boxing, where issues of substance are linked to arguments about standpoint, origin, authority

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and subjectivities. The result is that debates about analysis, theory and interpretation are also debates about the validity, and even legitimacy, of the utterances pronounced by those who study the continent. Of course, this is inherent in the study of the 'other' – as all anthropologists know. Yet, it would be disingenuous to ignore the fact that it is a more particularly persistent issue when it comes to Africa. I now turn to the two issues I raised above: (i) what does it mean to offer a political theory of a particular region of the world? (ii) what are the specific problems attached to the study of Africa as a region?

### THE USES OF POLITICAL THEORY

Tackling this question in a constructive way demands that we address two separate problems. One is whether an agenda in terms of political theory is best suited to accounting for politics in Africa. The other has to do with whether it is possible to think in terms of the political theory of a region and, if it is, whether it is desirable. These are both complicated questions and I limit my discussion only to what is relevant to this book. Indeed, my standpoint throughout is resolutely 'pragmatic': I favour what serves to provide insight over theoretical ambition. Or, to put it another way, theory is only deployed where it clearly serves the purpose of offering an account of African politics that is enlightening. Therefore, my aim is not to construct a political theory of Africa but only to try to theorise politics in Africa – that is, to engage in the theoretical discussions that can provide added value to our understanding of how power is exercised on the continent. Of particular acuity here are the questions of whether prevailing notions of theory are ethnocentric and whether existing theories of comparative politics are suited to the study of Africa.

There is no reason in principle to argue that 'theory' is ethnocentric if the definition of theory is a general one, such as the systematic organisation of knowledge. However, that is too simple an approach. Theory does not stand in a vacuum; it is constructed

within historically bounded contexts and it is applied in specific ways. Furthermore, the very meaning of theory is problematic since it implies a particular way of 'explaining' that derives from a Western tradition of rationality and scientific endeavour, which originates in the Enlightenment. In the longer term it may well be necessary to recast our approach to what theory is supposed to imply in such a radical fashion as to invalidate much of our current scholarly work.<sup>1</sup>

For now I want to stress that present-day social science assumes that the concept of theory is generally intended to connote a particular set of articulated causalities, especially related to issues of development or progress. Therefore, to engage in a discussion of a 'political theory of Africa' is necessarily to take up the issue of comparative politics – and this for two reasons. One is that modern political theory as it is practised in Western academic departments is usually understood either as an attempt to conceptualise the evolution of politics in Western societies or as a study of Western political thought. The other is that any attempt to develop a political theory to make sense of other societies is necessarily an attempt to compare the West and the non-West.

The political theories that are relevant to the study of post-colonial Africa fall into distinct, largely chronological, categories: development, Marxist, dependency, socialist, indigenous, neo-patrimonial and democratic. Although such classification is somewhat simplistic, and these categories are not neatly delineated with absolute precision, and in some cases overlap, they do represent the main frameworks of analysis and debate since Africa became independent. I've discussed these theories in detail elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> so I focus here on what they entail as political theories of Africa. I want especially to highlight the interpretative and causal differences between these approaches as well as the assumptions they share.

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1. As I will do in my next book, *Western Rationality after Post-Colonialism*.

2. Chabal, 1994, Part I.

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Theories of development, whatever their guise, made two clear assumptions: the first was that there is a path to (economic and political) development, which all countries follow, if in different ways; the second was that Africa is merely behind on that path but that it will eventually catch up. Therefore, the role of theory was to identify those factors that hindered or facilitated the onward march of progress, which independence was supposed to have made possible. The questions asked were intended to assess the extent to which political processes and economic policies favoured the 'natural' development of the continent that would follow its freeing from the colonial yoke. Such theories, which must be set within their Cold War context, were thus teleological and rested on well-understood causalities: economic growth would facilitate a type of socio-political change, which in turn would enable the gradual emergence of more democratic polities.

Marxist (or neo-Marxist) and dependency theories can be seen as mirror images of development theories in that they were also teleological and also offered clear causal links. Whereas the former saw in the spread of capitalism and the workings of competitive politics the template for 'development', the latter considered that socialism and the vanguard party-state would drive 'progress' forward. However, this broad church was divided between those who believed that socialist solidarity was necessary and those who argued that socialist autarchy was the solution. Hence, some advanced the need for more capitalist penetration of African economies while others advocated instead a national economic development plan that would cut off dependence on the world market and thus break the vicious circle of underdevelopment capitalism brought about.

What I call 'indigenous' theories refer to the diverse, and not always compatible, approaches that stemmed from a local rather than universal conceptualisation of African politics. These range from the once influential debate about African socialism to the call for an 'authentic' African development, by way of an argument that one-party or no-party politics are the most appropriate for Africa.

These theories derive in part from a vast intellectual and historical scholarship, which sought to refocus history and social sciences within a more genuinely African perspective. They relate in part to claims that Africa had a much more central place in the development of the modern world than Western theories allow. These theories also question the universal validity of the equation often made between modernisation and Westernisation.

Briefly, I would like to bring out both the origins and the relevance of those 'indigenous' theories. Going as far back as pan-Africanism and Négritude, there has always been in Africa a strong vision of what made the continent different. Much as he was later lambasted for his essentialist views of Africans, Senghor certainly made manifest in his writings aspects of African culture and art that resonate to this day. Although in his political practice Senghor was a very conventional politician, it cannot be denied that he was able effectively to combine a commitment to a modern notion of economic development and an astute understanding of the local factors that were relevant to political success in Senegal. His argument is interesting in part because it was articulated with such brio, even if Négritude failed to spawn a theoretical progeny.

However, there are current echoes of the argument about African specificities. Museveni's view that the continent must avoid party politics is not a mere quirk. It rests on a well thought-out argument that, in present circumstances, multiparty politics will inevitably be channelled through and exacerbate ethnic conflict. This political theory of Africa thus rejects the assumption that political development must necessarily follow the contemporary Western model. Equally, the current Ethiopian regime's insistence on organising political representation on an ethnic basis derives from a notion of the 'natural' organisation of African peoples in today's Africa – even if, like Museveni's template, it can also be seen as self-serving. More broadly, there is a school of thought arguing that ethnicity in Africa is more than mere relic from the past. It is at the heart of the everyday realities of morality, accountability and representation and

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as such needs to form the bedrock of any realistic political theory of the continent.<sup>3</sup>

What I group under neo-patrimonial theories includes a fairly wide range of distinct approaches, which all share the view that a conceptualisation of local factors is critical to the understanding of African politics. Here there are two contrasting starting points. One is that what matters most is the historical working out of patterns of universal development as applied to Africa. The other is that indigenous socio-economic and cultural features have determining influence over the exercise of power in Africa. Of course, these are fundamental differences that ought not to be brushed aside but I am concerned here to stress why both converge in their analysis of contemporary African politics, as can be seen in their discussion of the state. The former argues that the transplantation of the Western state has failed to take root, implying thereby that it was the wrong model. The latter adduces that the African state necessarily reflects the patrimonial nature of local politics. The upshot is not dissimilar: the state is not institutionally functional.

Democratic theory, which is virtually hegemonic today, harks back to a straightforward developmental approach that is reminiscent of earlier modernisation models. Sustained by a vision of liberal democracy as the only viable model of modern politics, this theory interprets the present blossoming of multiparty elections in Africa as the early phase of an ineluctable move towards democratisation. Rooted in institutionalist notions of political change, it rests on the supposition that the practices of democratic elections will eventually result in the emergence of a democratic political 'culture'. Like earlier democratic theories, it is universalist, teleological and steeped in a notion of modernisation as a variant of Westernisation.

I will not here assess the extent to which these various theories are ethnocentric since the book itself provides the elements needed for an appreciation of how justified or relevant this concern is.

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3. Lonsdale, 1995, 2003.

Instead, I want to look more closely at the notion of agency, which has become today one of the most influential approaches in the political analysis of Africa.

### THE QUESTION OF AGENCY

This first question is, why has the notion of agency acquired such a prominent place in the current social science discourse on Africa? What, in any event, does agency mean or, perhaps more concretely, how does the concept help us better understand African realities at the beginning of the twenty-first century? What, if any, are the connections between the focus on agency and the current international order, which is commonly thought to be detrimental to Africa?

Agency is usually understood as directed, meaningful, intentional and self-reflective social action. It comes out of a long-standing debate about the respective importance of structure and individual action in social change. That debate has its roots in two distinct genealogies. The first has to do with a number of shifts in the social sciences since the 1960s. The second is linked to the evolving situation in Africa, which most analysts frame today in terms of the impact of globalisation on the continent. The dominance after the Second World War of Marxist, neo-Marxist, teleological or structuralist approaches to the study of society began to be questioned in the 1960s. However, it was not until the 1970s that its supremacy was challenged. Foucault and Habermas, each in his very different epistemological manner, initiated a number of critiques, which were eventually to change the face of the social sciences. These changes began to influence the way Africanists went about their business.

There were at least two important shifts in history and the social sciences, which had a deep impact on the question of agency. On the one hand, the rise of cultural history and the linguistic turn have led to a reassessment of historiography. This has opened up a vast transformation in the 'theory' of history, particularly in areas such