

African agency in international politics: scope, analysis and theory

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Abstract

This paper reviews the studies presented in the ESRC seminar series African Agency in international politics and outlines both the substantive analytical questions and theoretical problems that arise from those debates. The paper begins with a schematic outline of some contemporary contexts within which questions of African agency in international politics have come to the fore. For each we are faced with a sense of a renewed level of activism by African political actors, but one that is still tightly constrained by historically-shaped structures of uneven development. The paper argues that four main arenas of African agency require our attention – multilateral, bilateral, intra-regional and sub/non-state. These arenas, alone or in combination, raise substantive issues around the importance of geopolitical contexts; state capacities and leadership; and discourses and issue framing. After this outline of the scope of the field, the paper then reviews some of the more abstract theoretical debates that have arisen, including the relevance of realism, governmentality, state agency and deeper questions about agency in international politics. These theoretical concerns in turn return us to a wider question about the relationship between IR theorising and the realities of Africa's international relations.

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1. Introduction: ‘Why Africa? Why Agency?’

Over the past decade, African states have become increasingly prominent actors in international politics, evident in their role in international trade negotiations, processes governing the distribution of aid and discussions over climate change, as well as military and humanitarian intervention. African governments and non-state actors have responded to changing international circumstances (the rise of China, increasing economic integration) with renewed diplomatic and political activity on world and regional stages. In a more indirect way, social processes shaped by African actors (both state and non-state) are generating new areas of interdependence between the continent and outside powers in the form of ‘new’ transnational security issues - migration, environmental degradation and health among them.

The ESRC seminar series on African agency in international politics sought to engage with this renewed activism by addressing three key questions. First, what is the extent of African agency and the varieties of agencies at work in international politics? Second, what are the sources and constraints on that agency/ies? And finally, what are the analytical and theoretical implications for International Relations of a study of African agency? We shall get to those issues in a moment, but two prior questions were eventually raised at the fourth seminar in the series: why Africa and why agency?¹

The question ‘why Africa’ might be answered in a number of ways. One is that ‘Africa’ is used as an exemplar of minor powers/‘small states’ in the international system and as such serves as a set of cases through which to explore the view of international relations that begins somewhere other than with the great powers. Another approach would be to highlight the on-going debate about the ways in which and extent to which Africa sits uncomfortably within the discipline of International Relations and thus acutely poses questions about the universality of IR’s theoretical constructs. Another is that Africa does in fact matter (west and east) for a range of policy areas, particularly those involving multilateral for a, international collective action, or areas where there are marked relations of interdependence. Drawing on all of these, a more direct answer is that in exploring questions of agency in international politics, Africa (seemingly) serves as a limit case – if anywhere might be characterised as most bound by existing structures of power surely it is Africa? Major shifts in the polarity of the international system have not been significantly affected, or effected, by African states and significant structures of economic and political governance remain stubbornly persistent to arguments for change from any other than the biggest powers. But if that is so, how then can we explain the apparent increase in agency exercised by such a dominated set of players?

However, such arguments also prompt a different reading of the ‘why Africa?’ question, namely, why (or to what extent should we) speak of Africa as a singular whole? Indeed, any attempt to define a field described as broadly as this one is bound to run the risk of partiality and over-generalisation. To speak of African agency of course is a non-starter if that were taken *unproblematically* to be a unified political force in international politics. Although having a colonial history is shared among almost all African states, as Harrison argues, even here the diversity of experience and diversity of the impacts of colonialism make this a unity based on the ‘broadest of sweeps’ (2010: p.15). Aside from that, a unity arises in weak form for Harrison from the instances of collective assertion by African states of influence in the

international arena, something we will look more at below, but which as Harrison notes, has a patchy record at best (Harrison 2010: 16). The second, stronger form of unity is discursive, in the way that Africa is constructed as an entity both by outsiders and by African political actors and intellectuals (Harrison 2010: 16-17). This arises in particular in the realm of development policy where common problems and solutions are frequently ascribed to 'Africa' as a whole. Assessing agency at this very generalised level therefore invites analysis of the concrete impact of African states acting collectively in international forums (and the nature of that collectivity) as well as the extent to which Africa as a category is utilised by other actors, creates opportunity or constraint for such African collective or individual state projects; as well as the ways in which African political actors themselves, both state and non-state, utilise the notion of 'Africa' as a means to further their actions in the external world.

However, if the answer to why (and what extent) Africa partly lies in the ability to ask questions about agency, why focus on agency? Here, the answer lies in the attempt to approach the subject of Africa's international relations in a new way. The seminar series in this sense has sought to begin to find a way round the conventional approach to understanding Africa in international relations (which asks how external actors and events impact upon the continent) by asking instead how rising African activism in international politics impacts upon the international system including the policies and decision-making processes of western powers and international institutions. The intention, at least partially realised I think, is to try to treat African states and political actors as serious, real historical subjects in their own right and not simply as the recipients of other actors' whims or cogs in the machine of some dominant global structure. A focus on agency achieves this aim, not by simply inverting the convention and stressing a voluntaristic, panglossian view of agency – as Mamdani warned, '...it is only when abstracted from structural constraint that agency appears as lacking in historical specificity...' (Mamdani 1996: 10-11) – but by requiring an account of the mutually-constituting and changing relationship between agency and structure.

In this review I address these issues in the following way. First, in a review of some of the key contributions to the African agency series, I suggest a 'scoping of the field' identifying some of the key arenas within which we need to consider African agency. Second, I identify from these contributions a series of substantive analytical questions that arise. Third, I review some of the theoretical debates that have been prompted by these studies. Finally, I conclude with some thoughts on the contribution this series of studies might make to broader questions about theory and Africa's International Relations.

2. Scoping the field – arenas of action

If those answers to the questions about the purpose of the series are accepted, we still nevertheless, need to try to outline more substantively some key parts of the field of social action with which we are concerned. The range of areas over which we consider the issue of African agency is indeed vast though in an attempt to summarise the field there are perhaps four broad arenas of African agency that have been covered.

First, and perhaps most prominent are the multilateral arenas of inter-governmental negotiations. Here African states have been making their mark in the WTO, where there is

substantial evidence of increased agency in the large number of proposals, chairs of committees, ldc coalitions and delegations involving African states (Lee 2011: 14); in the climate change negotiations where Africa as a block and South Africa, Sudan and Ethiopia in particular, have risen to prominence (Zondi 2011; Hoste 2011; Chevallier 2011); and in the central UN system itself (Zondi 2011).

Second there are the various sets of bilateral relationships African states are engaged in. The most notable, perhaps is in aid relationships where African governments engage donors on an individual basis (although the donors at times act collectively through donor consultative/coordination meetings and the like, it has been a feature of aid relations that recipients rarely do the same) (Fraser 2011). But for some African states like Uganda there are also substantial bilateral discussions that range over a wider range of issues, particularly security and counter-terrorism (Fisher 2011) and many states have engaged in bilateral dealings on trade and climate change outside of, alongside and at times in contradiction to the collective African presence in the multilateral forums (Chevallier 2011).

Third, and overlapping with both of the above, is a set of intra-regional processes and arrangements, most notably the African Union itself which, founded in 2002, has gained a continental and international presence far beyond that achieved by its predecessor the OAU (Zondi 2011; Tieku 2011). This has included the AU role in multilateral negotiations noted above but also an increasing role in responding to conflicts, security problems and processes of military and humanitarian intervention on the continent.

Finally, there are a variety of studies of the role of non-state actors in sub-state arenas but ones which interact, either directly or mediated via their national state, with international organisations and agencies of various kinds. Areas where these issues arise include the 'new' 'security' issues of environment, health and migration where the role of international and national forces shape and constrain the agencies of particular groups and communities in ways that may both marginalise those agents and undermine successful policy responses (Perera 2011; Hammerstad 2011; Seckinelgin 2011; Raleigh 2011).

3. Analytical questions

These varied studies raise a whole host of issues to do with agency, but three areas of enquiry are immediately apparent: how we interpret agency and geopolitics; second, how we understand the role of 'domestic' factors in relation to agency, states and leaders; and third, the relationship of agency and political discourses.

3.1 Geopolitical contexts: polarity, bargaining and acting collectively

A key factor in the opening up of greater space in the international arena for African states' activism has been the 'tectonic' shifts in power at international system level, especially through the impact of new powers on the institutions of international governance. Shifts in polarity – to what Zondi, following Huntington refers to as a 'uni-multipolar hybrid' with the USA's unquestioned military advantage matched by a broader dispersal of economic power (also see Bromley 2009) – have altered the landscape of international governance. For Zondi,

‘The growth of multilateralism in an increasingly multipolar world with the rise of China and India to challenge the north-Atlantic axis has had a positive effect on Africa’s participation in global affairs’ (Zondi 2011: p.4). This has been enhanced further by the rise of more ‘small club diplomacy’ with a multiplication of groupings – BRICs, G20, BASIC and the like – becoming more prominent (Zondi 2011: p.4).

However, as Donna Lee has pointed out, the impact on African activism is not all one-way. On the one hand, renewed activism by African states is both enabled by and contributes to the diffusion of power in multilateral forums. It is enabled by it because in the absence of other means by which the leading economies can dominate multilateral forums, ‘numbers count’ and with 53 states, this gives African states a crucial role (Zondi 2011, Lee 2011). And it contributes to it through further strengthening the influence of developing country groupings, in the WTO-based Group of 20 for instance, and through the role of the ‘cotton club’.

One of the consequences of this dispersal of power in the WTO has been an ‘impasse’ in multilateralism. The absence of hegemonic leadership reflects ‘a complex of numerous sets of strategic alliances that includes perhaps a dozen or so states as major powers with diverse – often conflicting – trade interests in the WTO’ Lee maintains, ‘Put simply, authority and market power in the contemporary global economy is too dispersed to enable member state driven institutions such as the WTO to effectively govern multilateral trade.’ (Lee 2011: p.8-9). The paradox for African states is that such an impasse leaves them with something of a pyrrhic victory, the influence of ‘saying no’ but equally without much prospect that the forum can deliver policy outcomes in the form of a more development-friendly trade regime.

The role of African countries in the WTO, as well as in the climate change arena has also been driven by attempts by African states to utilise its advantage in the numbers game in international forums (Zondi 2011). The results have been patchy. In the case of UN reform, the Africa common position outlined in the Ezulwini Consensus was arrived at through a consensus-forming process that resulted, because of the need to accommodate such disparate interests, into an implausible and inflexible negotiating position that left Africa marginalised in the UN discussions (Zondi 2011: p.9-11). Influence in the Copenhagen negotiations was greater and the common Africa position was a first for the AU (Hoste 2011). But even there the collective position could not withstand the centrifugal pull of national interests, South Africa taking a key role in the drafting of the Copenhagen Accord out-with AU oversight after pre-summit bilateral deals and splits between Ethiopia and Sudan had undermined AU cohesion on the issue (Zondi 2011: p15; Hoste 2011: p.6-7).

These experiences leave serious doubts about the extent to which African states were able and willing to pool sovereignty within the AU and whether common positions that have been arrived at have resulted from pragmatic alliances or a more sentimental notion of continental solidarity (Zondi 2011: p.5). ‘In the end’ Zondi concludes, ‘nation states are reluctant to cede any sovereignty to the organization [the AU] in order to enable it to independently pursue common interests of the continent.’ (Zondi 2011: 17).

Such paradoxes are reflected also in consideration of the rise of new powers in the international system and in Africa. None are more important here than China whose rise has done much to reshape overall polarity in the international system and, together with India and

Brazil, in multilateral forums. But China's role in issues like climate change is potentially double-edged. In giving support to Africa's common position it enhances the position of African states within the negotiations. As China, the EU and the USA battled it out, having Africa 'on side' began to matter more than hitherto. Against this however, China's success in getting Africa's numbers lined up behind a negotiating stance (against binding limits on its emissions) which cannot deliver the necessary changes needed to protect Africa from the worst effects of climate change, may leave a more damaging legacy.

Within Africa, the prominence of South Africa as a leading player has continually grown. Through the WTO negotiations and the formation of the common position in the build up to Copenhagen, South Africa confirmed its status as a regional power on the continent and abroad (Hoste 2011: p.6). However, South Africa's geopolitical role is hedged in on all sides. South Africa's ability to lead on the climate change issue is constrained both by regional sensibilities (not wanting to overplay its hand in the region) and by the material interests of the country itself. As the biggest emitter in Africa, it is constrained in terms of the negotiating positions it can support without endangering its own economic growth prospects which are highly carbon-intensive (Chevallier 2011). In this case its own interests in the negotiations potentially run counter to some AU states including those who are members of the AOSIS group (Chevallier 2011). In the run up to Durban 2011, the demands on South Africa will only increase, as host the need to get a successful deal of some kind may also impinge on its ability to lead and represent the continent as a whole (Chevallier 2011).

In terms of analysing African agency in today's international system, several key questions arise. First, what is the relative balance of system-level influences on the extent of African agency (issues like polarity and the rise of new powers and the policies and actions of great powers) as compared to more regional- or country-specific factors affecting bargaining strength (issues like alliance formation, discourse and state capacity). Second, is the impression of increased African agency really just a by-product of the irrelevance of those forums within which it has become prominent – the stalled negotiations around trade and climate change – or is it that impasse that creates an opportunity for lasting influence? Lastly, what potential is there for an African agency based on the pursuit of common interests through the AU as a negotiating block and whether on any issue there is enough genuine coincidence of interest for this to be a viable vehicle to promote African interests in the international arena. If there is not, does an AU-focussed approach that necessarily relies on fudge and compromise, limit the potential role and impact of regional hegemonic powers like South Africa and Nigeria?

3.2 Capacity, leaders, states and society

Informing much of what African states are able to do with those opportunities that do arise within multilateral forums, are a collection of issues more 'domestic' in orientation, to do with capacities to act, the dominance of leaders as state agents in the international realm and the wider state-society relationships that both capacity and leadership issues are shaped by.

Geopolitical strength, particularly as translated in the realm of international negotiations, is critically dependent on state capacities and whether African states have the institutional and

political strength to effectively consider interests and formulate and articulate policy. Fraser has argued (and Fraser and Whitfield assessed in more depth) that having a strong sense of national interest and the ability to carry that forward has been important in bilateral aid relationships (Fraser 2011; Fraser and Whitfield 2009). In both bilateral aid negotiations and negotiations with multilateral agencies, countries such as Rwanda and Ethiopia have both been able to preserve some policy autonomy from donors partly as a result of internal political processes and conditions (Fraser 2011; Whitfield and Fraser 2010; see also Rusagara's account of Rwandan post-conflict processes). As such, capacity questions here mesh with a series of other internal and external factors that determine recipients' negotiating strength in aid bargaining, others being wider economic conditions, geopolitical contexts, levels of indebtedness and institutional factors such as the history of relations with donors (Fraser 2011).

Lee also points to capacity questions as exerting a key role in shaping African agency in the WTO. Moves to enhance African state capacity have had some effect, she argues, although ironically this has enhanced African agency through the utilisation of resources of western NGOs and agencies as well as WTO and UN-based support (Lee 2011: p.18). According to one African negotiator quoted by Lee, the effect has been positive: 'We have learnt to ask why, we have learnt to ask how, and we have learnt to say no.' (Lee 2011: p.12). However, such presence in WTO negotiations and the impact it has, is nevertheless limited by the wider impasse noted above.

Capacity is also a critical issue for the role of regional organisations. For the AU, its ability to contribute to or lead mediation efforts in conflict resolution would be significantly enhanced with greater institutional capacity and expertise (Tieku 2011). As Tom Tieku argued, the advent of the AU saw regional leadership of negotiations in Burundi improve markedly on the protracted process led by the OAU. Nevertheless the complexities and nuances of such negotiations demand skilled mediators able to draw on substantial expert and institutional back up if the failures of that process are to be overcome (Tieku 2011). John Kabia also highlighted limited funding provided by member states, the level of corruption and the weak economic conditions as factors which undermine the efficacy of regional organisations like ECOWAS (Kabia 2011). Even in Africa's most developed state, South Africa, concerns arise about its ability to draw on enough expertise to effectively manage and lead the climate change negotiations as chair and host of the Durban 2011 round (Chevallier 2011).

Another key issue raised in a number of cases is the particular role of political leaders in African international relations and both the over-extended role they sometimes play as well as the considerable domestic and regional political constraints that accompany that form of state-based agency. According to Fisher's study of Uganda's foreign policy, Museveni exerts an overbearing influence on the country's stance, limiting the role of domestic bureaucracy and of non-state Ugandan actors (Fisher 2011). Historic and personal connections between South Africa's leadership and the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe have long been seen as one of the sources of that country's 'softly softly' stance on the Zimbabwe crisis ([x, y]). Hammerstad outlines how the standing of South Africa in the region, as well as the leadership's personal ties to Zimbabwe, constrained South African policy on immigration – a limited room for manoeuvre for this most powerful African state in its domestic affairs which has the knock-on effect of marginalising the political role of Zimbabwean immigrants in the

country (Hammerstad 2011). In turn, in west Africa, inter-personal relationships and alliances shaped the west African response to the crisis in Cote d'Ivoire in 2010-11. Ghanaian support for the incumbent Gbagbo regime and domestic elections in Nigeria and a number of other countries, curtailed the ability of the regional organisation ECOWAS to respond (Kabia 2011 and Alaga 2011). Such paralysis in the face of this crisis meant it was left to the UN, and the former colonial power France, to make the decisive move. The record of the AU in relation to the Libyan crisis in 2011 is similarly chequered: undoubtedly independent from the stance of the UNSC but due in no small part to the loyalty of some African leaders to the ousted Gaddafi regime, and stretching the AU's credibility in the eyes of some observers.

Both issues of capacity and the role of leaders raise wider questions about statehood and state-society relationships in African foreign policies. One doesn't have to sign up to all the arguments about 'personal rule' in African politics to see how limited state capacity and underdeveloped bureaucracies combine with a marginalised civil society to allow an autonomy for (or perhaps a dependence on?) state leaders in foreign policy. However, this form of agency comes with its own constraints. The role of 'personalised' policy is itself circumscribed by the very personal, political and clientelist relationships that underpin that form of politics itself. More generally, limitations on capacity should themselves be seen as one of the products of the particular processes of state formation in the continent, shaped as they are by the complexities and novel social forms thrown up by combined development. Limited capacity and the role of leaders as key state-based agents in international politics should not therefore be seen as purely 'technical' issues, amenable to a programme of NGO training courses and staff development (though they are that too). More, they are symptoms of the influence of wider social structural factors in shaping how agency in many of the fields we have reviewed is formed, operates and to what ends.

Two key analytical questions that arise therefore include what is the role of 'structural' and 'domestic' factors in constraining and shaping African agency in international politics both in terms of the kinds of state-based agents who enact that agency as well as the degree of subjective freedom they exploit? And, secondly, how African agency in contemporary international politics is shaped by wider historical social and political processes arising from the particular developmental trajectories of the countries concerned? As noted in the introduction, generalising an 'African' experience here may have some utility though the dangers of over-simplification are also great.

3.3 Discourses and issue framing

Finally, political discourses and policy framings are seen to have a bearing on the scope for and character of African agency. Within the multilateral arena, Donna Lee has argued that changes in trade discourse have had a major impact in re-framing the contests within the WTO, African states changing from a 'crying game' to a 'won't do' stance: 'What these states lack in market power, they make up for in discursive power...by developing diplomatic strategies from what some officials in Geneva refer to as a "Crying Game" to reinforce moral appeals to greater fairness in global trade governance to what has been termed a "won't do" strategy'. (Lee 2011 p.3). The shift in trade discourse at the turn of the century, with the language of development coming much more to the fore, opened a political space for African

negotiators in the WTO – ‘The new discourse of legitimacy and fairness has facilitated African activism in the DDA’ Lee concludes (2011: p.16).

In a different context, Jonathan Fisher has analysed how Museveni’s government has pursued an active policy of trying to manage and shape donor perceptions of Uganda, in a way which keeps donors ‘on side’ despite serious misgivings about the domestic political situation in Uganda and the country’s involvement in the DRC conflict (Fisher 2011). As Cargill noted, this has at times been a subtle strategy, presenting different images of Uganda even to different departments of the US government (Cargill 2011). ‘Through managing donor perceptions’ Fisher claims, ‘the Ugandan regime has chosen to subvert the structural logic of aid dependence...’ (Fisher 2011: p.28). However, this strategy relies on two other conditions: that donors are unwilling to impose harsh conditions on countries that are ‘useful’ in other respects, such as in trade or foreign policy; and secondly that limited detailed donor knowledge of recipient countries allows space for such ‘perception management’ (Fisher 2011: p.28).

In several contexts, most notably in health and climate change, the effects of ‘securitising discourses’ have also been hotly debated in terms of their effects on African agency. On the one hand – as argued by Stephan Elbe – securitisation of HIV served to increase funding for HIV programmes and in turn opened up political spaces for African states in high-level meetings once HIV had become an important issue on the international security agenda (Elbe 2011). However, against this, Hakan Seckinelgin argued that such securitisation has a negative impact on vulnerable populations, making policy discussion more top-down, marginalising community-based agencies that need to be empowered for effective HIV programmes to work (2011). Similarly, Clionadh Raleigh argued that discourses of environmentally-driven violence are based on a denial of agency on the part of rural communities vulnerable to climate change. ‘...the relationship between violence and rural vulnerability is both exaggerated and accusatory...’ she maintains, denying the potential of rural communities to react in any other way than with violence to the challenges posed by environmental stress (Raleigh 2011). Moreover the empirical evidence for such a direct link is weak and a clearer focus on the actualities of agency in environmentally-vulnerable communities shows a range of coping mechanisms (Raleigh 2011).

Within the security and health fields, a key issue has been the extent to which framings of policy, by international donors or regional bodies, has the effect of prioritising or marginalising different categories of agent within recipient states. Here, the recognition by outsiders of some actors and not others as agents in a particular policy field, has important consequences. In the case of ECOWAS, a long-standing emphasis on states and the military, and a policy directed at regime security was only slowly giving way to a focus on human security and the involvement of civil society, particularly women’s organisations in conflict prevention and resolution processes (Kabia 2011, Alaga 2011). In the case of health, Seckinelgin’s study of HIV programmes in Burundi illustrated how focussing on ex-combatants at the expense of other vulnerable groups within communities, particularly women, both reinforced existing processes of marginalisation and undermined the effectiveness of the interventions themselves (Seckinelgin 2011). Here, the dual impact of existing structures of gender relations and the power of external donors serves to constrain agency ‘on the ground’ in important ways (Seckinelgin 2011).

Suda Perera also highlighted the impact of such framings on the agency of refugees, suggesting that the way these groups were conceptualised as agents affected the political response of recipient governments and home governments. Seeing particular groups as ‘warrior refugees’ limited the political roles that were possible for such groups both in terms of gaining eventual citizenship in the host country as well as their potential for return to the home country (Perera 2011).

Several interesting questions are raised by these debates. Most abstractly, what is the standing of such discourses as constraints on agency and what is the role of agency in forming and promoting different discourses and changes therein? (A welcome part of Elbe’s argument is that it is clear that securitising discourses are seen to be promoted by actual political agents for particular reasons, so discourses don’t have the kind of free-floating causal role they take in some other accounts.) More prosaically, what room for manoeuvre is there for African agents to change political discourses and policy framings at the international level in ways which enhance that agency and how far does invocation of Africa as a unified category enable or constrain such strategies?

4. Theory, Africa and agency

As will be clear from this survey, although generating many insights and covering a wide terrain, the term agency has been used in a rather general sense in many of these studies. We have spoken of states and other actors ‘having agency’ within certain forums, with the sense of agency meaning something akin to ‘an ability to act’, ‘influence’ or perhaps ‘power’. As Wight has noted, in much IR literature, this is as far as discussions of agency gets, following something like Buzan’s definition of agency as ‘the faculty or state of acting or exerting power’ (Buzan, et al 1993: 103; cited in Wight 1999: 126). I suggest below that we may need to go further than this, though that too is not without its problems. Indeed the theoretical debate prompted by the seminar series fall very broadly, into two main areas: how we might theorise the exercise of agency in the international system and how we might conceptualise the notion of agency itself.

4.1 Room for manoeuvre: theorising agency in the international system

Three contributions to the seminar series engage, in different ways, with the theoretical challenges of understanding the exercise of African agency in the international system. We have already seen in Section 3 that some of the most important issues to arise from the series concern the question of how to analyse the exercise of agency by African states within the wider geopolitical landscape.

Starting from a realist standpoint, in a pessimistic assessment of the future of African states in what he terms ‘the emerging markets century’, Stephan Andreasson argues that Africa’s agency, defined as an ability to change global structures, remains extremely weak. For Andreasson, the international system is and will remain state-centric and African state weakness remains the continent’s Achilles heel. As he summarises:

‘Because we live in a system in which state capabilities and strength remains central to the pursuit of national interest... it is Africa’s relative, and in some cases near-

complete, lack of empirical statehood...which explains its persistently peripheral role...an inability to influence current shifts in the international system to better meet Africa's interests and needs.' (Andreasson 2011: p.7)

For Andreasson, the legacies of colonialism and post-independence development, mean that ineffective international agency is a symptom and not a cause of state weakness. The priorities for strengthening agency – even for South Africa, the continent's most developed state – therefore lie in domestic state strengthening and capacity building.

Although pitched as a realist account and appropriately pessimistic in its description of the realpolitik facing African states, the emphasis on domestic political factors sits uneasily with realism, at least in its structural variant, where system-level distributions of power provide all the explanatory means necessary. However, that aside, while one might query the rather sweeping description of 'African' statehood as a uniform phenomenon, the focus on domestic political structures as a key factor shaping agency is echoed by others.

Notably, for Chris Landsberg, African agency needs to be understood in relation to the very particular role played by state leaders (Landsberg 2011). The period 1998-2008 was a 'golden age' of African diplomacy according to Landsberg but was one driven by the vision and activism of a group of African leaders – Mbeki and Obasango backed up by Kufor, Chissano, Mkpapa and Zenawi. Bolstered by the influence of the 'pivotal' continental states of South Africa and Nigeria, this grouping formed a new continentally-focussed leadership able to make a real impact on the international political agenda and the fashioning of a 'continental international society'. While this golden age, for Landsberg, resulted in new commitments on aid, debt, trade and security, the period since 2008 has seen a dissipation of such influence. Characterising African foreign policies as heavily driven by personalities, changes in leadership in most of the key states has resulted in a loss of momentum on all fronts. While giving an account that shares some ground with Andreasson, and similarly pessimistic conclusions, Landsberg nevertheless leaves greater room for a reassertion of effective agency internationally in an account that places considerable explanatory stress on the role of individual political actors within an our understanding of agency.

The emphasis on making effective use of the room for manoeuvre that does exist is explored further by Danielle Beswick (2011). Beswick resurrects Steven David's theory of 'omnibalancing' to reinterpret Rwanda's management of its foreign relations, emphasising the active use of regional and international alliances to create space for state agency. Originally formulated to analyse developing countries' foreign policies in the context of the bi-polar cold war system, Beswick reinterprets the theory to analyse the foreign policy choices facing Rwanda drawing attention to the way in which Rwanda has appeased regional adversaries and placated international allies in order to free up state capacity to deal with domestic political challengers. It was this combination that led Rwanda into its surprise alignment with the DRC in 2009 to tackle Congo-based militia groups, Beswick argues, thus extricating Rwanda from international criticism of its involvement in the DRC and reducing the potential for domestic opponents to ally with international donors. Beswick argues that the theory allows us to see how: 'weak' African leaders, seemingly lacking agency, play off threats at different levels in order to prevent a perfect storm of alignment between domestic threats and international actors...' (2011: p.13).

To some extent all three contributions maintain use of a general, academic shorthand notion of agency defined as ‘an ability to act’ or ‘ability to change structures’. However all three also suggest that theorising African agency requires attention to both the domestic shaping of that agency as well as the wider international structures within which it is exercised. Three other theoretical contributions in different ways take up the challenge of how to conceptualise agency itself.

4.2 Conceptualising agency

In his contribution, David Williams has pointed out that in much of the IR literature, questions of agency focus on the state and how far states can be said to ‘act’, also noting rightly that such questions are general problems in IR, not specific to Africa (Williams 2011). Williams argues that that writers in IR often make rather sweeping use of ‘as if’ academic shorthand – we speak of states and other actors ‘as if’ they were agents analogous to individuals. Indeed, it is arguable that in descriptions of the potential ‘space’ for African agency arising due to the broad shifts in power and polarity at the international system level, highly abstracted ‘academic shorthand’ (Wight 2006, Williams 2011) might suffice. Any attempt to account for or describe anything requires some form of abstraction and part of Wendt’s justification for speaking of states ‘acting’ is that it seems to describe reasonably accurately what is going on (Wendt 1999; 2004). However, as the discussion above shows, this doesn’t ‘get at’ several key dimensions of ‘African agency’, particularly forms taken by state-based agency, nor for the most part the analysis of the inter-relations of structures and agency. But perhaps more directly, in building an analysis that is able to accurately describe or explain the extent of and constraints on African agency, we immediately need to move beyond a shorthand. Indeed, as Andreasson’s erstwhile realist account perhaps shows, unless one sticks to an account that is ‘purely structural’, then one is forced to give a more rounded and nuanced account of agency that goes beyond such shorthand.

Carl Death’s contribution makes the case for the use of the concept of governmentality to unpack the questions about what agency means in an African setting, which African actors impact on international politics and how are these agencies are constituted? (Death 2011). Death argues that Foucault’s concept of governmentality, interpreted as an analytical framework rather than a series of propositions about specifically liberal forms of rule, can be usefully deployed in studying African agencies. For Foucault, as for Bayart, specific technologies and techniques are used within particular fields of governance to create agencies and ideas and subjectivities are brought into being through action. Death argues that the Foucauldian framework can help to explain Africa’s continued participation in climate change negotiations, despite so little end product. Rather than outputs from the negotiations in the form of strong limits on emissions, it is participation itself that delivers pay-offs for African states, giving them access to resources and reinforcing the performance of functional, responsible statehood (Death 2011: p.34-5).

Indeed, it is this notion of the ‘acceptable face’ of state agency that preoccupies David Williams’ contribution. Like Death, Williams argues that problems of understanding state agency are not specific to Africa, however, he argues that what is different about African state agency is the extent to which state agency is subjected to greater external scrutiny than other states in the international system. Any state agency has to be produced and reproduced

through political and other practices, Williams maintains, in terms of the ways in which the state is perceived to act as a whole unit, the extent to which states generate effective collective action ('large scale organised 'doings'') and the extent to which others' actions are seen as 'state' actions through processes of authorisation and representation (Williams 2011: p.8-9). Indeed, it is through insistence by external actors on particular authorisation rules (such as democracy) and particular interpretations of what effective state action should amount to, that external actors seek to shape the particular character of African state agency (Williams 2011). 'In other words' Williams argues 'the politics of state agency played a central role in the internal and international politics of many newly formed African states...In more recent times western states and agencies have become more and more concerned with the authorising rules within all African states that would generate legitimate representation.' (Williams 2011: p.12 and 17).

In my own contribution I sought to argue that we needed to pay attention to the different dimensions of agency in order to develop a more nuanced view of how different forms of agency (state versus non-state for instance; leader-dominated versus bureaucracy-dominated, say) can be identified and the different relationships between particular agencies and the structures they reproduce and transform, both domestically and internationally. In doing this I drew on Colin Wight's work on agency in international relations. However, I argued that a distinction needed to be maintained between state-based agencies (including leaders or diplomats 'representing' or 'acting as agents for' the state) with non-state actors. The norm of sovereignty, seen as a recognised right to rule and ultimate authority was key to this distinction, I suggested (Brown 2011).

Such considerations are crucial to understanding the different forms of African agency. As many have noted, it is international processes of mutual recognition of sovereignty that define the membership of the international 'club' of states in the first place and as a result the very rights to attendance and participation in the varied multilateral forums and bilateral relations surveyed in section 2 (for example see Jackson 1990, Clapham 1996, Mayall 199x). Without acknowledging this we simply cannot comprehend African agency in these arenas. In Wight's terms, it is also sovereignty which defines key aspects of the social location and role-performance of those agents authorised to act on the state's behalf in these contexts. Indeed, it is as recognised leaders (and hence 'representatives') of the state, that leaders are able to claim a right to speak for and on behalf of a particular country. And sovereign authority confers on state agents an ability to recognise or not, give legitimacy or not, to other actors.

5. Theory and African IR; or, 'it's a long way from Colin Wight to Kenya'

The danger of such departures into more abstract theorising are of course well known. More theoretical debates about African agency, however much intended to be driven by the substantive issues in front of us, nevertheless have a habit of drifting off into a realm far removed from the world around us. As David Williams put it, 'it's a long way from Colin Wight [on whose very abstract work I drew] to Kenya'. Avoiding the twin evils of abstract universalism and the endless detail of particularism are problems that concern IR theory wherever it is applied. As Frederick Cooper put it, speaking of the challenges facing

historians – we need to find African agency ‘in all its complexity, contingency and limitations’ rather than by the ‘flattening of the complex lives of real people’ (Cooper 1994: 1518).

For what it’s worth, my own (interim) conclusions are that theoretical attention to the notion of agency is needed, up to a point. First, having a better means of identifying agency and the different characteristics of agencies at work in international politics is important for understanding the politics involved. The different social locations from which actors arise and the social roles that they have, are important in shaping what they might seek to do with any subjective freedom they enjoy. In whatever form we take it, what African agency signifies politically is therefore made more understandable through using a more nuanced sense of what agency is. Second, states are different and they matter in a different way from non-state agencies. Not that the latter are unimportant, but appeals to the importance of civil society actors whether in peace-building or in international negotiations cannot obscure the centrality of state-based agencies in the political realm. Third, knowing something about the character of agents and particularly the character of state-based agencies is important politically and normatively for those inside and outside the continent. Finally, from a policy point of view, there is a need to understand what shapes the intentions of agents, both state and non-state, if policy (whether that of African states themselves or of outsiders) is to be effective.

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Footnotes

¹ Although rather longer in its original formulation, these two questions were provocatively raised by Elsje Fourie at the fourth seminar in the series. High time, one might admit, to address them in a series on African agency in international politics!