AGENCY, AFRICAN STATES AND IR THEORY

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David Williams
Department of International Politics
City University
London

david.williams@city.ac.uk

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to think through a particular problem in IR theory in the context of the broad project of African state building. The problem is whether or not states can properly be said to 'act'. This problem has a rather peculiar status within IR theory. It is regularly agreed to be a problem and yet, apart from a few notable exceptions, almost all scholars of IR proceed as if it was not really a problem. It hovers as it were at the outskirts of the discipline, although in recent years discussion of the problem has been reanimated by Wendt and the debates his argument has generated (Wendt 1999; Wendt 2004; Wight 2004; Wight 2006; Frank and Roos 2010, among others). This paper is driven by the thought that thinking this problem through in the context of the discourses and practices of 'state-making' in Africa can shed light on this debate.

One reason for this is that when we think about 'state-formation', 'state-making' or 'state-building' one of the most important things we are talking about is the generation of plausible claims to state agency. In other words one of the characteristics of 'proper' states is precisely that they can be thought of as 'acting' units (albeit for a variety of reasons). Indeed, there is a case to be made that much of the historical and historical-sociological literature on state-formation in Europe is really about the ways in which new forms of political agency become possible. We can think here, for example, about the rise of nationalism as a new form of political identity which binds people together in new ways and makes new kinds of practices possible (large-scale war for example) and which, at least in its idealised form, provides a new kind of language for thinking about state actions. We can also think of the rise of the centralised and increasingly bureaucratised state apparatus which again allows for new kinds of political projects. Finally, of course, at least in the history of the West, there is a transformation (again rather idealised) in the language of political authorisation and representation which has at least a dual character: the 'nation' or 'people' are represented by their rulers (a claim about identity) through various forms of rule-bound procedures (a claim about legitimacy). This thought cannot be fully substantiated here. However, the paper will suggest that this picture of state-formation and the generation of new forms of state agency is one that has in fact loomed rather large over the IR theory that has tried to think about state agency. It is because the state-formation process in many African states is different from that
of European state-formation, that the African context provides fruitful grounds for considering what it is that might make claims to a specifically state agency plausible. Further, this paper will also argue that this picture of the state and its agency is also one that looms large over the actual processes of state building in Africa, especially in terms of the ways in which western agencies have attempted to assist in the creation of 'proper' states. Put in a slightly different way, this paper is an attempt to explore theoretically, as well as practically, the problem of state agency.

Thinking about IR theory in the context of African states and African international politics is not a new endeavour. Many analysts over the years have been concerned to see whether IR theory 'works' in the African context (Brown 2006; Lemke 2003; Lemke 2011; Clapham 1998). Much of this has been shaped by the view that African states might be rather different from the states that typically inhabit at least 'traditional' IR theory, and that relations between African states, and relations between African states and western states and agencies, might also be rather different a result of this (Clapham 1998; Herbst 2000; Brown 2006). This paper sits within this broad stream of literature, but it argues that the ambiguities about state agency that emerge are not at all unique to Africa. African states help to provide some of what we might call the 'limit cases' but the broad issues that emerge are ones that can be applied to thinking about state agency in general. One reason for this, I suggest, has to do with the inevitably political or normative elements in any ascription of agency to the 'state'. This element tends to be overlooked when we consider 'proper' states as the various elements that might make up a claim to a specifically state agency tend to go together. (Even here, though, sometimes the political and normative appear - Iran-Contra is a classic example). But in the context of African states (and some states elsewhere of course) they very often do not, so that it is not just possible, but rather common to have extensive arguments about whether this or that action should really be understood as that of the state, or whether this or that person is properly authorised to act for the state. One only has to think of Libya, Cote d'Ivoire, or Zimbabwe to see this. An exploration of the problem of state agency in the context of Africa in fact reveals the complex constitution of state agency and the political and normative considerations and judgements that make up any such claim.
THE POSSIBILITIES OF CORPORATE AGENCY

At the most general level there are some good reasons for thinking that it does indeed make sense to talk of states as 'acting' - although there are of course extensive arguments about this proposition that will not be explored here. As will be argued in a moment there are several different ways in which states can be said to act, but as a basic analytical position it seems to me relatively unproblematic to say that collective and corporate entities can 'act'. First, there are extensive resources available in a variety of disciplines. There are philosophical discussions of the problems and possibilities of collective and corporate agency (Searle 1995; Tuomela and Miller 1988; Tuomela 2007; Clark 1994 among others). Within this broad strand of literature there are various different approaches, but what they all have in common is a concern with those kinds of actions that can only be accomplished as a member of a group and which in turn require individuals to exhibit a form of intentionality that holds within it a collective intentionality (a 'we-intention'). Within law there are extensive discussions about the possibilities of ascribing criminal responsibility to entities such as corporations (as opposed to the individuals working within corporations) (See Dan-Cohen 1986 among many others). In turn these arguments raise deeply problematic issues of ethics revolving around the relationship between individual responsibility and collective or corporate responsibility for, say, collectively sanctioned violence (Thompson 1980). It has also been recognised that there are traditions of political thought rather different from the western liberal-individualist tradition for which the reality of corporate forms was central (Gierke 1996 [1900] famously; see also Runciman 1997). All of these lines of argument are open to objections of various kinds, and, particularly in terms of the philosophical debates, it is unreasonable to expect any kind of final resolution to them. But in different ways these lines of thought provide good reasons for thinking that it can make sense to consider collective and corporate entities as agents at least as a general position.

Second, even if one was unconvinced by these philosophical arguments, it is clear that much of our life is dominated by collective and corporate entities (states, corporations, universities, government departments, political parties, pressure groups and so on) and that it seems to make perfect sense to use the language of corporate agency in our everyday dealings with them - my university does indeed seem to do things, as does my government, and as do corporations. Our ordinary language, which uses ascription of corporate agency all the time, may be a shaky ground upon which to base our theorising, but on the other hand, as Kaviraj
has argued, it might also be that this language has a particularly sly ability to grasp something real about the world that more sophisticated social theories sometimes struggle with (Kaviraj 1997). Third, and related, modern political life is in some ways obviously characterised by large projects (war-fighting, revolutions, elections, health service provision, 'development') that require not just individual actions but collective and corporate ones. A sociology of modern politics provides good reasons for thinking that collective and corporate agency might be real, and adds considerable weight to Wendt's 'ultimate argument for the reality of unobservables': 'it would be a miracle of a concept that predicted observable behaviour so well did not refer to something real' (Wendt 1999: 216).

Taking this position - that as a matter of principle it can make sense to ascribe agency to collectives and corporate bodies - is not the same, however, as saying that any particular state (or other corporate body) can be said to have acted. The philosophical argument is not a substitute for more empirical, and as will be argued, political, investigations into the extent to which any particular state (or other corporate body) can in any particular instance be sensibly described as 'acting'. This paper is primarily concerned with these kinds of political and empirical arguments, rather than the philosophical ones. One of the aims of this paper is to shift the debate about state agency away from questions of philosophy and towards questions of politics. The African context is a particularly fruitful place to do this because what we might call 'the politics of agency' have been, and remain, so contentious.

THE PROBLEM OF STATE AGENCY IN IR THEORY

'In studying International politics it is convenient to think of states as the acting units. At the same time it does violence to one's common sense to speak of the state, which is after all an abstraction and consequently inanimate, as acting. This is an important point for any theory of international relations' (Waltz 1959: 175-6).

Waltz is one of the few IR theorists to have taken the issue of state agency seriously (at least until Wendt). It is not entirely clear that Waltz really deals with the problem in an adequate fashion, although he makes a number of important points about the issue that will be discussed below. Generally, though, most scholars of IR have been (and continue to be) happy to use the language of state agency all the time. The 'problem' of state agency is a problem, however, most notably because when pushed scholars often abandon the ordinary
language of state agency and embrace more or less formal theoretical languages that deny the reality of this agency. There are several alternatives here. The FPA tradition opens up the 'black box' of the state and explores the agency of its component parts, and one variant of the liberal tradition focusses on the actions of interaction of groups within society (Moravcsik 1993; 1997). It should be noted that this line of analysis often does not abandon ascriptions of corporate or corporate agency even if it abandons the idea of a specifically state agency (think of 'executives', 'bureaucracies', 'interest groups', or 'MNCs'). More radically, there are those who argue that the state and its agency is reducible to individuals and their interactions (de Mesquita 2009; de Mesquita and Lalman 1992). These claims mirror debates in economics about how to understand the firm - as a corporate agent or as a collection of individuals (Malchup 1967, famously).

Others, from a less consciously philosophical stance have suggested that talk of state agency really refers to the actions of a few top policy-makers or to individuals who act on behalf of the state (Krasner 1978). Famously Gilpin has said that 'the state does not really exist' (Gilpin 1986). There are other more puzzling claims too such as Carr's that state agency is a 'necessary fiction' (Carr 1964 [1939]). There is a final possibility that Waltz at times embraces, which is that the assumption of states as unitary actors is a 'useful' assumption. He says that whether an assumption is 'useful' 'depends on whether a theory based on the assumption can be contrived, a theory from which important consequences not otherwise obvious can be inferred' (Waltz 1979: 1). Waltz echoes Milton Friedman's famous argument about assumptions in economic theory where he says that 'the relevant question to ask about the "assumptions" of a theory is not whether they are descriptively "realistic" ... but whether they are sufficiently good approximations for the purpose in hand. And this question can only be answered by seeing whether the theory works, which means whether it yields sufficiently accurate predictions' (Friedman 1953: 15).

All these responses suggest that the language of state agency is a kind of shorthand. It might be suggested that this is fine, and the fact that most scholars of IR are happy to inhabit this slightly schizophrenic analytical universe suggests that most of the time it is deemed relatively unproblematic. But I am not sure we can be entirely content with this. For a start it is hard to know what to say to our students. In IR theory we tell them that states act (and indeed have all kinds of intentions - interests, wants, fears, ambitions), and in Foreign Policy Analysis we abandon this talk and talk of all kinds of other entities acting. This is a very
puzzling place to have got to. Surely, a bright student might ask, either they do act or they do not. Second, to describe this as shorthand begs the question of why we don't write in longhand. As a social science we ought to say what we really mean, at least a good portion of the time, even if it takes a little longer and is a little less elegant. The fact that so often even those who deny the reality of state agency use the language of state agency all the time adds weight to Wendt's 'ultimate argument'. Third, the very discipline of IR is founded on the idea that it is meaningful to talk of states acting: that there exists a realm within which states are the main 'actors' and that explaining the actions and interactions of states in this realm is the primary concern of IR. Realism, for example, would simply collapse into a discussion of the decisions of foreign policy makers (a kind of political psychology) if it could only talk about individuals (as de Mesquita comes close to doing – albeit a particular kind of political psychology).

Finally, and importantly in terms of the arguments of this paper, the slippery character of the problem - sometimes states act and sometimes they don't - reveals and creates real political effects which we ought to be aware of, and this is true for academics and practitioners. In other words, the existence of these two conceptual languages both of which can be used (sometimes by the same person) allows a switching between them based not on any very great philosophical insight, but based on a variety of political judgements. In other words, the actual ascription of state agency to certain particular actions is a deeply political matter. If Laurent Gbagbo did something did the Ivory Coast act? Probably most western policymakers would say no of his actions after the election. But clearly only recently his actions in, say, signing a loan agreement with the World Bank, would have been so accepted (the Ivory Coast would be responsible for repayment of the loan even if Gbagbo was not President). On December 31 2010, Britain along with other EU countries said it no longer recognised the Ivory Coast ambassador as a legitimate representative of that country and that it would only recognise a representative appointed by Alassane Ouatarra. Something importantly political is going on here and part of this is precisely about the conditions for ascribing state agency to the actions of certain people.

THE POSSIBILITIES OF STATE AGENCY

Part of the political character of ascriptions of agency to states is that, at least within IR theory (and I think beyond) such ascriptions can be composed of several different claims. I
want, rather summarily, to group them together under three headings. I have drawn from a variety of arguments but I think they represent the broad terrain.

The first revolves around collective identity. Here the argument is that some states, at least under some conditions, possess a kind of collective identity which allows us to say that when the state (or government) acts, that action really is that of the whole state. Waltz makes this claim in places. In *Man, the State and War* he says that 'the centripedal force of nationalism may itself explain why states can be thought of as units' (Waltz 1959: 177). Even when nationalism is not so powerful, he suggests that it can still make sense to talk of states as acting units. First, there are times, particularly during a war, where states take on the character of a single acting unit when the state 'mobilizes resources, interests and sentiments' (Waltz 1959: 179). Second, he argues, following a particular reading of Rousseau, that the idea of a unitary states works 'if the state is a unit that can with some degree of appropriateness take the adjective "organismic"'. Third, he suggests a slightly different argument which is that the idea of a unitary states works where 'some power in the state has so established itself that its decisions are accepted as the decisions of the state' (Waltz 1959: 177-8). Dissenters from the policy of the state are carried along either because they are powerless to change it or because they have an attachment to the state that transcends particular policies. Wendt echoes some of this. He says that one of the features that makes a state into an agent is the common knowledge of and commitment to the idea of the state as a collective. He quotes Weber: 'one of the important aspects of the "existence" of the a modern state ... consists in the fact that the actions of various individuals is orientated to the belief that it exists' (Wendt 1999: 219). Included in this are ideas about membership of a collective (an 'imagined community'), a discourse about the basic principles of their collective identity, and collective memories that connect them to the state's members in the past. (Wendt 1999: 219).

This is only way one the ways in which states might be thought of as 'actors'. But it does make a certain kind of sense. To the extent that there is some kind of national sentiment, or to the extent that certain kinds of actions (war-fighting) require a collective commitment, then it might make sense to say that the state acts in these cases.

A second and different, although related, sense in which states can be said to act is through the generation of collective action by the bureaucratic and coercive apparatuses of the state.
As Wendt says, 'the institutionalisation of collective action gives corporate agency the unity and persistence that it needs' (Wendt 1999: 220). It is obvious, although worth stating, that the enormous things that modern states can do are all predicated on the existence of an extensive bureaucratic apparatus that transforms the actions and interactions of individuals into actions of an altogether different kind. It does this through the existence of structures and sets of rules that exist apart from the individuals that inhabit them, and provide the state with its temporal continuity. Running alongside this bureaucratic apparatus of the state is a coercive apparatus that sometime has the ability to generate action in the face of reluctance or disobedience (a situation surely where we want to say it is the state acting not the person) - as Waltz noted. It might also be that something like this thought is behind Waltz's rather brief remarks about how the particular anarchic and thus competitive structure of international politics 'selects' certain kinds of action (Waltz 1979: 73-4, 92). Certainly this would connect up with historical-sociological accounts of state formation in Europe where war-fighting played a crucial role in driving the development of the bureaucratic state (Giddens 1987).

The collective action generated through these processes is never complete or unproblematic and the ideal type of bureaucracy is probably a fiction, as people subvert the rules and roles, and individuals sometimes exercise particular power - a point that emerges forcefully from debates about the 'agent-structure problem (Wight 1999). Nonetheless, it seems perfectly sensible to say that states can be said to act in this way. Indeed, one can go further and say that the possibility of acting in this kind of way (large-scale organised 'doings') is an essential characteristic of the modern state.

Finally, and again related, there is a particular sense in which states can said to act which is through being 'represented'. Certain persons are 'authorised' to act on behalf of the state (based on certain authorisation rules) and whose actions (sayings and doings) are those of the state. This is the sense, I think, in which those arguments to the effect that when we say a state acted we really mean that a few top policymakers acted, should be understood. It is their position as policymakers derived from certain rules about who and under what conditions someone can become a policymaker that makes their actions those of the state, rather than just their individual actions. I cannot declare war on another state, but the Prime Minister can, and when he does so we are at war. For Wendt the authorising effect of internal decision structures is the final constituent of corporate agency (after the 'idea of the state' and collective action) (Wendt 1999: 220). Importantly this authorisation 'means that individual
actions are constituted as the actions of the collective' (Wendt 1999: 221). This also allows us to say, or at least have arguments about, whether and when the actions of a person claiming to represent the state are not to be understood as the actions of the state: these actions have not been 'authorised' in the appropriate way (again Iran-Contra).

The basic problem here - how it is that one person can act on behalf of a collective - is an old one. Hobbes in particular worried about it because he needed an account of how individuals could 'represent' the sovereign/collective (Hobbes 1986 [1651] chap 16; Pitkin 1964; and Skinner 2005). There are knotty problems here, but the basic principle seems uncomplicated: under some conditions individual actions can rightly be understood as the actions of a collective or corporate body. Indeed, it is unlikely that the practical business of international politics could even get started without accepting that some persons represent their states and that their actions (signing a treaty, declaring war and so on) are to be understood not as their individual actions but as the actions of the state they represent.

In all these three ways that states might be said to 'act' it is of course people who do things - participate in wars, act within bureaucratic structures, and 'represent' states (Jessop 1990). The idea of state agency does not imply that people are not acting. As Wight has put it, 'common intention, to be realised, must always be mediated by individual interpretation' (Wight 1999: 128) But it does imply that the actions of people can be rightly understood as the actions of the state under certain circumstances.

THE POLITICS OF STATE AGENCY

The great benefit of sketching out these different ways in which states can be said to act is that they can relate to each other in different kinds of ways. In other words this 'field of possibilities' provides the site for political and empirical investigations as well as very often normative judgements - as in the case of the Ivory Coast. For example, it might be the case that a state is characterised by a strong collective identity, but that the actions of a person claiming to represent that collective would not be seen as the actions of the state because they had not been properly authorised. Similarly, we can imagine a situation within which the collective actions of the government might again not be seen as the state 'properly' acting as the government had not been authorised in the proper way or did not represent the collective identity of the people of a state (the South African Government under Apartheid perhaps).
We might also be able to imagine a situation in which a government was indeed recognised as the legitimate representative of the state, but which struggled to achieve much in the way of effective collective action (Afghanistan?). In these ways we can see that arguments about whether a state can be said to have acted might be intensely political arguments. They enable all kinds of distinctions to be made - between the people and rulers, between properly and improperly authorised representatives, between capabilities and legitimacy - that have a real political importance.

The politics of arguments about state agency can be seen in three other important ways. First, there may be differences between the internal and external understandings of what constitutes legitimate representation, or at least there may be external doubts about the legitimate representation of certain people or groups (as Ivory Coast recently). Rulers or whole regimes may be deemed not to be legitimate, even when they might have some capacity for collective action (perhaps Iraq under Saddam Hussein). It might work the other way of course, as regimes or rulers are deemed to be legitimate representative of the states (and thus their actions are understood by other states as the actions of that state) even when internally they may not be understood in this way. Second, it might be that there are changes over time in both the internal and external understanding of state agency. So, for example, collective national identity as the basis for legitimate descriptions of state agency is probably less important today, and of more importance are the particular authorisation rules (democracy for example). Finally, in recent years as various projects of 'state-building' have assumed significant importance in international politics, so the various ways in which states might legitimately be said to act has taken on a real practical political importance as western states and agencies have endeavoured to remake states in various ways that correspond to the ways in which we might think of states acting. So questions of 'identity' have assumed considerable importance (Kosovo and Bosnia for example); the capacity of the state to engage in effective collective action has often been the target of considerable attention; and western states have tried to institute certain particular authorisation rules, usually forms of democracy.

It should be clear, then, that the philosophical problem of corporate agency is only one part of the general problem of state agency. This is not to deny the importance of these arguments or their real intellectual interest, it is to say that beyond some basic answers to the question of whether state agency can be meaningfully talked about, the really important matters are political and empirical.
AFRICAN STATES AND STATE AGENCY

This section turns to the issue of state agency in Africa. Given what has been already argued, the purpose is not to argue that African states can or cannot be said to act, but rather to look at the various ways in which arguments about state agency have been deployed in the African context, and to make the case that western states and agencies are significantly concerned with the question of state agency on the continent.

There is a by now familiar story about the entrance into international politics of newly independent African states (Jackson 1993; Clapham 1996). Many of the 'traditional' demands of statehood were abandoned while at the same time international society treated these states as 'proper' states with some of the rights and obligations that attended this (diplomatic recognition, seats at the UN, right of non-intervention and so on). In addition to this 'negative sovereignty regime', international society took upon itself to assist these new states in the projects of state-building and international development. Nonetheless, right from the beginning, newly independent states in Africa struggled to make themselves into states that might properly be thought to 'act'; and over time western states and agencies took an increasing interest in the conditions of African agency. In other words the politics of state agency played a central role in the internal and international politics of many newly independent African states.

Collective Identity

Having assumed power and taken over the colonial state apparatus, many newly independent African leaders embraced the language of 'nation-building'. Nyerere, speaking in 1955 was typically forthright: 'another objective ... is to build up a national consciousness among the African people in Tanganyika. It has been said - and this is quite right - that Tanganyika is tribal, and we realise we need to break up this tribal consciousness among the people and to build up a national consciousness. That is one of our objectives towards self-government' (quoted in Shivji 2003). It was precisely the recognition that the people of most African states rarely constituted a nation that animated the project of nation-building: an attempt to generate a sense of national identity and attachment to the state that would supersede the particular forms of identity that existed. This problem was particularly pressing precisely because the
idea of collective identity was so important in the constitution of the state and its agency. It was not just that the people residing within the territory of many African states manifestly did not share a collective identity, it was that claims to the effect that states should be characterised by a collective identity threatened the territorial integrity of many African states whose borders crossed groups that might have constituted more plausible claims to a collective identity.

The broad project of nation-building took different forms, of course, but it was manifest, for example, in education and cultural policy (Palberg 1999). Perhaps most obviously it also shaped the particular kinds of economic strategy pursued in many African states where creating the 'idea of the state' in the everyday life of African people was at least one of the drivers for the significant expansion of state intervention in economic policy. It also shaped (although again did not determine) the elision between nation, party and 'father of the nation' that characterised some African states. There were, however, always ambiguities and tensions here. First, it was clear that the capacity of the state to impose itself in an effective way upon diverse societies was limited - in some cases radically so - and declined as economic crises engulfed the continent (see Lemarchand 1972 and Walker 1972 for early discussions of this). Second, the discourse of nation identity in Africa was complex. There were difficult questions about the relationship to the colonial experience (to do with how much of the language, culture and conceptual apparatus of the metropole to embrace) and to do with the relationship between nationalism and Pan-Africanism (Faloda 2001). In addition, of course, the legacy of particular forms of identity created by colonial rule was hard to overcome (Mamdani 1996).

Despite this, the project of nation-building was at least in principle endorsed by western states and agencies, even if they had anxieties about the content of certain ideological programmes. This was in some large part precisely to do with the conceptual apparatus of modernity and picture of what a 'modern' state should look like - which had as one of its key elements a 'nation' - and to do with the links that modernisation theorists made between the 'nation' and the ability of the state to lead a grand project of national development (Latham 2000; see also Walker 1972). As political and economic crisis engulfed the continent in the late 1970s and 1980s, however, so western states and agencies became altogether less enamoured of talk of 'nation-building' as it was increasingly seen as a rhetorical cover for the rapacious actions of unelected elites (Furedi 1994; Shivji 2003). From a different kind
Perspective, there were even those who doubted the whole enterprise of the modern state in Africa - although quite what the alternatives were was not clear (Davidson 1992). In addition, analyses of African politics started to turn away from the classic questions of how and to what extent 'modernity' might be instantiated in African states ('nation', 'democracy', 'party', 'development') towards an altogether more gritty analysis of what made African polities tick (Bayart 1993).

There are, however, still elements of this in contemporary western practice in Africa which suggests that the idea that some kind of 'national identity' remains a part of the ways in which western states and agencies think about African states, even if it is not explicitly articulated in this way. It can be seen, for example, in the ambiguities about 'civil society' in Africa where certain kinds of associational life based on affective ties are treated with a good deal of caution compared to more recognisably 'modern' groups (Williams and Young 2011). One of the things underpinning this ambiguity is precisely that these affective groups threaten the kind of national collective identity that is seen as one of the characteristics of a modern state. This kind of anxiety can be seen particularly clearly in the way that 'traditional' authorities are dealt with. One of the features of this has been to make traditional authorities subordinate too and integrated into the legal and developmental reforms pursued by western development agencies (World Bank 2007; Williams and Young 2011). 'Traditional' authorities may serve certain useful developmental or social functions, but the different basis of their legitimacy, and the different ways in which they exercise this authority (through traditional legal systems and land tenure systems for example) have to be at least limited so as to pursue the project of a properly national understanding of society and its relationship to the state. There are also echoes of the project of nation-building in the current concern with 'participation' and 'ownership' where eliciting the participation of social groups in the preparation of development projects and plans (notably through the PRSP process) is at least partly designed to generate some kind of (however problematic) national commitment to a national project. For example, in Ghana 'groups for consultation were selected based on their ability to build broad legitimacy' for the Ghanaian Poverty Reduction Strategy, '... groups were seen as partners whose support was felt to be necessary for the implementation' of the Strategy (Government of Ghana 2003: 5).

It seems clear, however, that the project of nation-building, at least as explicitly articulated in the period after independence, is now a much less prominent part of the project of African
state-building, and it is certainly a must less prominent part of the discourse surrounding African states. There may be some exceptions to this. For example, Paul Kagame has recently argued talked about the the 'conscious cultivation of a national identity' (Kagame 2010). And within Africa itself there is still a good deal of anxiety in some quarters about the 'idea of the state' and its relationship to a collective 'people'. But in general the idea of collective identity as the basis for legitimate claims to state agency has receded. This is no doubt related to changing sentiments in the west, where the bloody history of nation-building became a rather awkward subject, and it may be also related to the emergence of concerns about 'diversity' or 'multiculturalism' within western states, and the kinds of institutional and political arrangements conducive to managing this. In its place western states and development agencies have become much more concerned with the two other elements of state agency discussed above: collective action and representation.

Collective action

The problems that African states have had in generating effective collective action are well known. Right from the beginning of the study of post-colonial African politics the ability of the state to govern effectively - to generate effective collective action through the bureaucratic and coercive apparatus of the state has been questioned (Hyden 1983; Fatton 1988; see also Williams 2010). The effectiveness of the African state has been compromised (in the eyes of western states and many western commentators at least) by a number of factors. The mode of governing of many African states - often captured under the much disputed term 'neopatrimonialism' - has undermined the ability of the state to act in anything like a coherent way, and the basic structures of the bureaucratic state have not worked in the face of this to generate effective collective action on anything like the scale imagined at independence. This has been compounded by political instability and by economic and fiscal crises which often corroded the human and physical resources of the state to the point where its governing capacity has been severely compromised (this is not unique to Africa of course). The coercive apparatus of the state has sometimes functioned reasonably effectively, if brutally, to enforce the 'decisions' of the state on its populace. But even where this has been the case, it is not a substitute for the generation of effective collective actions through the bureaucratic apparatus of the state. This is seen as a problem by many western states and agencies because it has led to all kinds of economic crises and because the grandest of grand projects - development - requires a state capable of acting in effective collective ways.
The problem of the capabilities of the African state is one that has dominated the actions of western states and development agencies in Africa right from the 1980s and structural adjustment, although it accelerated in the 1990s with the ideas of good governance and the promotion of 'democratic transitions'. All kinds of activities have been directed at reforming the state and making it more capable of undertaking effective collective action (I have explored this further in Williams 2008 and Williams 2010). This has included reforming rules and procedures around government budgeting for example, or tax collection, the construction of new information collection systems, reducing corruption and reducing personalised character of African bureaucracies. It has also involved all kinds of training and 'capacity building' programmes for African politicians and bureaucrats. All this activity is about making African states act in the ways that modern states are thought to act - through rational bureaucratic procedures that generate effective collective action the pursuit of certain goals. But in ways that reflect the (rather idealised) history of western states, so this kind of attempt to generate more effective and capable governments has been accompanied by an anxiety about how any such state might relate to its society.

**Representation**

The 'representatives' of newly independent African states were recognised by international society as having the ability to act on behalf of their states. Indeed, for some years after independence the internal structures and decision-making procedures were insulated from international scrutiny (Clapham 1996: 50). Even rulers who authority to rule was deemed to derive from God, such as emperor Haille-Selassie, were not deemed to be 'illegitimate' representatives, despite the fact that these kinds of claims were deeply anachronistic to western states (Clapham 1996: 50). The negative sovereignty regime accepted African rulers and representatives of African states as the legitimate representatives of these states and accepted their actions as the actions of these states. The rather darker side of this was that more powerful states accepted them as legitimate representatives for a host of political and ideological reasons even when it became clear that it was empirically implausible to suggest that they somehow represented the wishes of the people who inhabited these states or that their rule had in some sense been authorised by the people (Zaire, Uganda).
The one partial exception to this were the regimes in Rhodesia, Namibia and South Africa. Here the anxiety about these governments was two-fold. These governments could not plausibly be said to represent the collective identity of these states and their claims to be representatives of their states was questioned as the basis of their authority was deemed to have violated international norms. These governments were accepted as governments by western states, and their ambassadors and Presidents were accorded international recognition (at least some of the time), but it was also increasingly accepted that these governments were illegitimate and that they could not plausibly claim to act on behalf of their states - even when, as in the South African case, they did have the capacity for effective collective action.

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. This can be seen more obviously in democracy promotion, but it can also be seen in initiatives such as HIPIC debt relief and the NEPAD process. There have also been actions taken against regimes that somehow or another are thought not to be properly representative (Zimbabwe for example) and even some of the more respected and supported regimes have experienced pressures to engage in democratic transitions (Ghana and Uganda for example). In this way western states and agencies have demonstrated a very significant concern with the authorisation rules that would enable representatives to be legitimately understood as acting for the state.

Making State Agency

It is clear that the discourses and practices of western states and development agencies have been heavily shaped by the more general and abstract arguments over what constitutes states agency. They are operating with a perfectly explicable account of what makes a state 'act'. Whether this account is entirely consistent is another matter. Clearly it is heavily informed by a rather idealised account of western states where these three elements - collective identity, collective action, and legitimate representation - are thought to go together. In the context of many African states however, it is not clear that these elements of western practice really do get together - or at least there may be tensions and ambiguities within them. The institutionalisation of democratic politics in divided societies can be highly problematic (as Kenya for example). Decentralisation can reduce the capacity for collective action (as can democratic politics).
CONCLUSION

The arguments presented here have several possible implications. First, that the question of state agency is most emphatically not an esoteric and philosophical one about which scholars of IR can be relatively unconcerned. As I have tried to show it matters politically and empirically a great deal whether or not a state can be said to have acted. Second, the different kinds of ways in which states might be said to act are in the world, in the arguments that people have about whether something can meaningfully be described as the actions of a state, and in the discourses and practices of western states and agency in Africa. In other words the sometimes rather inchoate recognition of the problems and possibilities of state agency that we find in IR theory are replicated in the actions of western states and agencies, and in the actions and strategies of African politicians. And in both of these cases they are informed by a particular account of what makes a 'proper' state that is derived from the historical trajectory of western states. This is not surprising. For all its concern with the realm of inter-state relations, IR as a discipline is fundamentally shaped by a particular vision of what a state is and this is, again unsurprisingly, shared by western states and agencies. Third, there is no final resolution to the question of state agency in particular cases (even though there may be a resolution to the question of whether it makes philosophical sense to talk of state acting). In that sense it is all politics, and this applies to all states, not just African states - although the issue is raised particularly acutely there. We can think of the 'not in my name' protests about the war in Iraq for example, or Iran-Contra. What these debates are about is precisely what kinds of actions can be legitimately described as the state acting.

Finally, the arguments given here provide a way into debates about Africa and IR theory. It is not that African states are totally different, nor is it that they never act. It is that the circumstances of many African states is such that ascriptions of their 'agency' is often conditional on, and in some cases produced and reproduced by, international society. In this sense even something as fundamental as their capacity to 'act' is often the product of the forces external to themselves; groups, governments and politicians do things all the time in African countries of course, it is just that whether this is really the state acting is subject to a good deal more scrutiny than is the case with other states.
REFERENCES


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