Africa and International Studies: From Development/Security to African Political Thought

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Argument

Teaching ‘Africa and International Studies / International Relations’ should incorporate the critical appreciation of African Political Thought (APT)

Two main drivers:
• Pedagogical reasons
• Contemporary concerns in researching world politics

Following on:
• How and what to teach?
What are teaching and learning for?

• Specifically, what are teaching and learning in International Studies / International Relations for?
• And what, exactly, is it possible to teach / learn?

Roughly…

• Information… about global history, events, concepts, processes, peoples, current events and issues
• Critical thinking skills… formulating an argument, interrogating assumptions, reasoning
• But also in humanities / social sciences… stretching the moral, intellectual, political imagination
• Cultivation of global citizenship?
What are we teaching now?

• Spectrum of engagement of IS/IR with Africa:
  – Nothing at all?
  – Week 17 on the International Relations course?
  – Global Poverty
  – Conflict / State failure
  – Responsibility to Protect / Humanitarian intervention
  – China in Africa
  – Development? Often seen itself as outside IR
  – African Politics as (outside) self-contained optional course
    • Focus on state-society relations
What are the pedagogical implications?

• Does engage issues of student interest, esp. around issues of global responsibility and ethics

• Offers a clear narrative about the distinctiveness of Africa’s place in the international system

• Allows engagement with the ‘development-security’ nexus in world politics

• When done well, good at promoting information and critical thinking
What are the pedagogical implications?

However…
• Reinforces Africa’s ‘deviant’ or ‘problem’ status?
• Reinforces the gaze of a privileged outsider?
• Emphasises questions of distribution rather than meaning in its conception of ‘the political’
• Reduces African politics to a set of opportunistic, tactical, derivative discourses for the appropriation of state power
• Limits rather than stretches the imagination?
• Promotes attitudes of entitlement to control / influence rather than respect / engagement?
Mismatches between teaching and research?

- Recent (and not-so-recent) theoretical ‘turns’ in IR open up the importance of:
- Positionality and the parochial gaze of IR theory (postcolonialism, feminism, philosophies of social science)
- Challenging the autonomy of the sphere of the ‘international’ (historical sociology, critical theory, international political economy)
- Broader significance of ideas in shaping political behaviour (constructivism etc.)
Why no APT?

• Currently hardly taught anywhere despite potential relevance on issues of rights, sovereignty, global justice etc.
• Why?
  • Myriad factors that include:
    • Few precedents
    • Poor knowledge of a canon / limited availability of texts
    • Assumptions of poor quality?
    • Assumptions of limited geographic / historical relevance? (not ‘universal’?)
• Not necessarily Africa-specific; generic ignorance of things outside the northern Anglosphere
• Shape of disciplines / organisation of knowledge
The potential of APT

• What do we mean by it as a category?
• Often refers to twentieth century writings of intellectuals and politicians in decolonisation (although this is limited)
• Important concepts:
• Significance of political ideas developed as a set of unique, creative, engaged responses to political conditions
• To study this helps the student to put themselves in the shoes of thinkers, activists and politicians
Limitations

• ‘APT’ as a problematic category – better to integrate various thinkers into issue-based debates globally?
• Whose lenses does the existing canon privilege?
• How might vernacular political thought be meaningfully engaged?

However,

• Some helpful resources emerging e.g. Martin volume, journals, e-books, Lauer and Anyidoho volumes
• Increasing student interest
  – Informal reading group covered: Blyden, Senghor, Cheik Anta Diop, Cabral, Fanon, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Biko, Ake, Mbembe
Conclusions

• Learning politics anywhere without a critical appreciation of relevant political thought limits its pedagogical value

• Teaching around Africa in International Studies / IR has been particularly neglectful of APT due to a narrowed focus on development-security issues

• However, we increasingly have the resources and ideas to promote a fuller pedagogical engagement with the issues in hand… can we do it?