AFRICAN AGENCY: IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

_African Agency: Implications for International Relations Theory_ was a one day seminar held at City University as part of the British International Studies Association (BISA) Africa and International Studies working group’s seminar series on _African Agency_. The seminar was sponsored by the ESRC and the School of Social Sciences, City University.

The purpose of the seminar was to review the findings of the first three seminars and to identify themes and commonalities on African agency and how they can be conceptualised within existing International Relations theory. The seminar took a cross-issue look at African agency in international politics in order to consider how African agency confronts the limits of how we theorise International Relations and alternatives ways of understanding global politics. The seminar asked a series of general analytical questions about Africa’s role in the international system including the extent of, and obstacles to, increasing African influence in global politics, and the underlying causes of and implications for Africa’s foreign policies and those of western states, the UK in particular. Speakers and participants then considered some of the conceptual and theoretical implications for the analysis of Africa’s international relations and for rethinking Africa in international politics.

This summary provides an overview of the key themes arising from the day’s discussion, followed by a more detailed breakdown of what was discussed in each session.

For further information on the African Agency series, see page 8 of this summary.
Summary of themes

Analytical results

• The role of leadership and personalities are crucial factors in analysing African agency. A ‘golden age’ of African diplomacy between 1998 and 2008 relied heavily on the initiatives of specific leaders in pivotal states, South Africa and Nigeria in particular, and with changes of leadership, this has dissipated.

• Understanding sovereignty and configurations of state power and capabilities remain central questions in how African Agency is understood. In all issue areas, from international negotiations to peacekeeping, state form, strength and capacity are crucial factors influencing African agency and how effectively it is exercised. Maximising agency therefore means focussing on domestic capacities as well as international configurations of power.

• We have to be careful in how we speak of ‘African agency’ as a (singular) form of collective agency. Such generalisations may be appropriate in very specific circumstances (such as that represented by African Union common positions) though here the record is very patchy.

Conceptual and theoretical implications

• Some existing theoretical approaches, including ideas about governmentality, omnibalancing and realist theories, are useful – if not contested – analytical tools for understanding African agency.

• There is a need to consider how agents are socially ‘produced’ or ‘constituted’ as well as whether they demonstrate ‘more or less’ agency. A key area is the political processes around how state agency in Africa is produced and externally-influenced.

• There is a need to consider how far and for what analytical purposes ‘common sense’ notions of agency as ‘the ability to act and effect outcomes’ are useful. Evidence of different forms of agent and agency may necessitate a conceptualisation of agency that is more nuanced if it to be applied in different analytical areas.
Details of presentations

Fractured continentally, undermined abroad: African Agency in world affairs – Christopher Landsberg (University of Johannesburg)

Following a ‘golden decade’ of African diplomacy between 1998-2008 there is currently a leadership void in African. ‘African renaissance’, ‘African solutions to African problems’ and ‘continentalism’ are all concepts associated with this golden decade but less apparent in recent years. The 2011 intervention in Libya shows a disregard by the international community for the African Union and African states’ commitment to not intervene in the domestic politics of another African state by force. The African Union has in fact stuck to its rules not to recognise those coming to power through violent means. Action by the international community was contrary to notions of pax Africana. The BRICS do not harbour altruistic interests in Africa but have ambitions to quench their insatiable appetites for resources. Solutions to these threats and a lack of agency would be a re-assertion of continentalism and collective agency in which Africa speaks with a common voice. However this relies on leadership and it is not clear current leaders are capable of countering African marginalisation.

Discussion of Landsberg’s paper included the following points:

1. African agency is more than just personalities and leaders but has as much to do with weak institutions and infrastructure
2. Is this a state-centric view of agency? What about civil society actors?
3. Can African diasporas perform an interlocutor role for agency?
4. Is there a need for more optimism on Africa’s collective agency? E.g. mobilisation on decolonisation and redefining statehood; promoted Human Right; campaigning against apartheid; emphasising development in the UN; and supporting the International Criminal Court.
5. Do we need to think about two levels of agency – individual and collective – and to acknowledge that the two are not mutually dependent?

From Empire and Cold War to the Emerging Markets Century: what can we learn from Africa’s persistently peripheral role in International Relations? – Stefan Andreasson (Queens University Belfast)

African agency has become increasingly marginalised specifically in regard to emerging markets and shifts in the global political economy. Agency exists within a global order that is characterised by the realpolitik of
international relations and thus weak states continue to suffer. If agency is defined as an ability to change structures, African agency has been very weak internationally. The structure of African states inherited from colonial rule has restricted their ability to exhibit agency and locked them into a pattern of weakness. Whilst African states have engaged in South-South dialogue, such dialogue exists in an asymmetrical system that favours Africa’s competitors. For African states to exert agency they need to engage in a bottom-up strengthening of capabilities and focus on national competencies before engaging with the international scene of bilateral and multilateral negotiation.

Discussion of Andreasson’s paper included the following points:

1. Are Western states not also in a position of weakness in relation to emerging markets? What is specific to Africa in this context?
2. Do empirical examples of Africa’s role in WTO negotiations not suggest agency?
3. Do we have to be neo-Realists to theorise weak African states? And is the analysis presented really realist given the emphasis on domestic factors? In addition, does the ideational matter at all?
4. If this is an accurate description, how do we theorise change?

**State Agency and State Formation – David Williams (City University)**

The ambiguities of state agency are not specific to Africa. The problem of state agency is that of state formation. To understand state agency and state formation scholars need to shift the focus away from questions of philosophy to that of politics. Theory tends to be used as a means of denying the reality of state agency and the persistence of western ideas of what constitutes a ‘proper state.’ Like all states, African state agency is determined by political processes including representation and recognition. However, what may be different about African state agency is it is subjected to greater external scrutiny than other states. Like many of the attributes of states (territory, population etc) agency is one that has to be produced and reproduced through political and other practices. We can read the (changing) processes of state-formation and state-building in Africa as attempts to fix a particular set of understandings of what it might mean for a state to act onto African states.

Discussion of Williams’ paper included the following points:

1. What are the differences between collective and corporate agencies? And how does Wendt’s idea of the state as a person fit with this approach to state formation?
2. The process of recognising governments are ‘representative of the state’ is crucial but how significant a phenomena in Africa is the non-recognition of governments?

3. Does the paper merge collective identity of a political community with bureaucratic structures?

Africa, governmentality and the international: reflections on agency and the climate change negotiations – Carl Death (Aberystwyth University)

Although many argue that concepts for understanding political agents are not easily translated into African contexts, Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’, if used as an ‘analytical grid’, offers a useful way of understanding African agency in regard to how power is exercised and rationalised. Governmentality shows how sovereign, disciplinary, pastoral, liberal and biopolitical forms of agency inter-relate and how specific techniques and technologies are used within particular fields of government to create agency. As evident in the work of Bayart and Foucault, ideas and subjectivities are brought into being through action. Applied to African participation within climate change negotiations, agency is exhibited through the performative function of visibility and legitimacy within such negotiations. From such a perspective Africa is not marginal to processes of international relations or IR theory.

Discussion of Death’s paper included the following points:

1. Where are coalition governments situated within this? Shared governmentality?
2. As well as asking about ‘governmentality of what?’ it is also necessary to ask about ‘governmentality by whom?’ – who are the dominant agents in the process?
3. Bayart’s notion of Africa’s marginality presents a slippery slope. How can we measure marginality?
4. Where can we locate responsibility within governmentality and climate change negotiation?


The concept of ‘omnibalancing’ drawn from Stephen David’s work, rejects Realist and neo-Realist balance of power theories and instead concentrates on how particular regimes react to multiple (domestic, regional and international) threats to their survival. Applied to individual states such as the case study of Rwanda it reveals the manner in which regimes are able to protect their own security by focusing on primary adversaries, dividing threats and appeasing international allies. Rwanda’s ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)’s decision to align on security issues with the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2009, shows its use
of omniblanacing to appease regional and international actors in order to create space and increase its room for agency domestically. This allowed it to counter domestic challengers in the run up to the 2010 Presidential elections. As such this concept is a useful device in understanding how African leaders perceive threats to their rule and exhibit agency.

Discussion of Beswick’s paper included the following points:

1. Omnibalancing may answer the big political science questions but if stripped of generalisations, what about rationality of African agents and nuances to agency?
2. Does omnibalancing overlook some key points to negotiation?
3. Omnibalancing suggests African states hide regional strategies when they are often quite open and upfront about it regardless of international opinion.

Still ‘agency in tight corners’? Analytical notes on African agency in international politics – William Brown (Open University)

Empirical evidence of the role of African state-based and non-state actors in climate change and world trade negotiations and in articulating and responding to new security threats suggests African agency exists in various forms. African agency can be located in bilateral, multilateral, intra-regional and non-state areas. Analytically this means we have to account for geopolitical processes, collective actions and the role of specific security discourses. We need notions of agency that accounts for different dimensions of agency (subjective action, social context and role) and its historical production. However, sovereignty remains key in distinguishing between state and state-based forms of agency and other forms. Accounts of African agency must be attuned to the mutual constitutions of agents and ‘the structures they bring with them’, and that sees in agency not only the subjectivity and roles it enacts but also the historically-produced social contexts from which it originates.

Discussion of Brown’s paper included the following points:

1. Do we need a single conception of agency rather than simply explore different it is exerted?
2. How to avoid notions of ‘Africa-as-victim’ while exploring external limits on agency?
3. How can we overcome the tendency within policy discussions to refer to Africa as a whole?
4. Need to remember that discourses of Africa and development are gendered and racialised.
African Agency

For further information and access to the full papers featured in this workshop, please visit http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/bisa-africa/african-agency/

_African Agency: Implications for International Relations Theory_ was the fourth of a series of seminars on African Agency. The previous seminars were on:

*Emerging agents of change?* Chatham House, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2011

*Peace, Conflict and Intervention* University of Birmingham 7<sup>th</sup> April 2011

*Transnational Security* University of Kent 16<sup>th</sup> June 2011

*African Agency: Implications for International Relations Theory* City University 14<sup>th</sup> September 2011

The fifth seminar _Agency and Southern Africa_ is to be held at the University of Stellenbosch on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2011.

If you are interested in attending this seminar or would like further information on the series, please contact Sophie Harman sophie.harman@city.ac.uk or Will Brown w.brown@open.ac.uk