

A question of agency: Africa in international politics

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Abstract

Over recent years African states have become increasingly prominent actors in high-level international politics. This article makes the case for studying Africa's international relations from the point of view of agency. The article outlines contemporary contexts within which questions of African agency have come to the fore and argues a need to think conceptually about agency in international politics in a way that accommodates the range of different agencies at work. The article outlines three main elements as foundations for the analysis of African agency: first, a conceptualisation of different dimensions of agency; second, a recognition of the importance of sovereignty in differentiating between state, or state-enabled agents and others; and third, a temporally-embedded approach to agency in order to historicise contemporary agency. Combined, these elements suggest that future work on African agency would be able to engage seriously with the continent's role in international politics in a way that presents Africa as actor not just acted upon, historical agent not just history's recipient.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade and more, African states have become increasingly prominent actors in high-level international politics, evident in their role in international trade and climate change negotiations, the G8 and G20, and a range of new ‘south-south’ coalitions¹. There has been an increasing activism in processes governing the distribution of aid and an increasing role in military and humanitarian intervention. 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’ ‘security’ issues – migration, environmental degradation and health among them. ‘The fact is’ Taylor argues ‘Africa is increasingly important in international relations and is more and more attracting interest from a variety of actors at a scale perhaps not witnessed since the original Scramble for Africa’². Yet, on many fronts, African states remain at best minor powers, still ‘hemmed in’³ by the seemingly immovable structures of international inequality, by high levels of poverty and underdevelopment, often fragile economies and weak political and military capacity. This article will assess how significant is the apparent resurgence of African participation on the international stage and how it might be possible to characterise the nature of that agency, its constraints and its social location and political purposes?

This article argues that a focus on African agency in international politics provides a useful way into an analysis of this tension between notions of a renewed African activism in international affairs and the persistence of wider, ‘structural’ constraints on the continent’s actors. A focus on agency allows us to frame an analysis which foregrounds the politics of African states and other actors as serious objects of study and stands in sharp contrast to the standard approach to analysing Africa’s international relations. Rather than asking how external actors such as aid donors and great powers old and new have impacted on, and intervened in a marginalised, victimised and almost politically inert ‘Africa’, a focus on African agency turns this on its head and asks instead how far and in what ways have African states and other actors been able to act on and in the international system. A focus on agency achieves this aim, not by stressing a voluntaristic, panglossian view of agency, shorn of structural constraints and historical specificity⁴, but by requiring an account of the mutually-constituting and changing relationship between agency and structure.

This isn’t an entirely new departure but nor is it well trodden ground. Wider IR literatures, such as that on ‘small states’⁵, and specific works on Africa seek to approach international relations ‘from the bottom up’ as Clapham put it⁶. However, there is only limited guidance for an analysis of African agency in the contemporary period. There is a theoretical literature on agency in international relations in general, although this is not as extensive as one might expect⁷. There is also, especially from the late 1990s, a developing literature on many aspects of Africa’s international relations⁸. There is a range of debates in historical and cultural studies of Africa, especially around colonialism and its aftermath, dealing with questions of African agency and the role of individual and group experiences in relation to more universalistic structural accounts of colonialism⁹. While analysis of African agency in today’s international politics can and should draw on all of these resources, as a field of study there is also some groundwork to be done.

The purpose of this article is to outline the beginnings of a framework for analysing African agency in contemporary international politics. I begin with a brief outline of the scope of the field, identifying some of the key areas where a range of African agencies have come to the forefront in international politics. In the following section I suggest that a flexible conceptualisation of agency is needed to locate agencies in the ‘complex dialectical interplay’ with the structural contexts from which they arise and in relation to which they operate¹⁰. In doing this I make rather schematic use of Colin Wight’s conceptualisation of agency which directs our attention to the different subjective-, context- and role-specific facets of agency¹¹. However I also argue that in international politics the persisting relevance of sovereignty demarcates a dividing line between state and non-state agencies – a demarcation that is crucial to understanding the opportunities and constraints for African actors in international politics. Finally, I argue that to grasp the contingent openings that contemporary African political actors seek to exploit, it is also necessary to pay attention to the temporal aspects through a historicised account of African agency.

2. The field of African agency

Any attempt to delineate a field as broad as ‘African agency’ is bound to run the risk of partiality and over-generalisation and the range of areas over which one can consider African agency in international politics is indeed wide. At the risk of considerable oversimplification, there are four broad categories of African agency that I will consider in this article: that exercised by collective intergovernmental organisations including the African Union and sub-regional intergovernmental bodies; that exercised by national states; the agency of state-based actors acting on behalf of national states, particularly state leaders and their representatives; and sub- or non-state actors. To differing extents, all have participated in raising the prominence of Africa within the wider field of international affairs.

As should be obvious given the diversity of the continent, speaking unproblematically of ‘*African agency*’ in the singular is hazardous. However, following Harrison, there are at least three senses in which speaking of ‘Africa’ as a whole might be justified in this context: as a collective international actor; as a collection of states with (in the ‘broadest of sweeps’) a shared history; and as a discursive presence, used by both Africans and outsiders, in international politics and policy¹². All three feature to varying extents in the analysis of African agency.

Perhaps the key institutional change that has helped to elevate Africa’s standing in international politics was the formation of the African Union (AU) in 2002. This was a significant change for a number of reasons, signalling a break from much of the post-independence era and establishing new principles for regional cooperation and integration. However, it also represented the start of a renewed attempt to make African numbers count in international forums. Encompassing 54 African states (following South Sudan’s addition in 2011) the AU has the potential to be a major negotiating group in the international arena, giving it a weight, because of numbers of states, that out-performs its weight in traditional estimations of power. Indeed, the AU has actively sought to make use of this advantage, forming common negotiating positions in the debates around UN reform and climate change. Success has been mixed – in the case of UN reform the so-called Ezulwini Consensus

saddled the continent with an implausible and inflexible negotiating stance that arguably did nothing to end the marginalisation of Africa¹³. However, in climate change negotiations, the impact has been more significant with African voices exerting a much stronger influence than had hitherto been the case at the Copenhagen summit in 2009, Cancun in 2010 and, with South Africa as host, in Durban in 2011¹⁴.

Continentially too, the AU has become a player in a way that the predecessor Organisation of African Unity, rarely did. New principles governing peace and intervention, together with western donor and UN support to increase African security capacities, has seen the AU coordinate African forces in a number of ceasefire and peacekeeping missions including Burundi, Somalia, and Sudan¹⁵. Furthermore, the AU has also sought to speak for Africa as a whole over peace and security matters, witnessed most prominently over the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011. Here the AU was a strident critic of the NATO action and, on the basis that it was upholding the AU's own rules on conflict and intervention, argued strongly that it should be left to African states to respond to the crisis¹⁶. Such a stance was viewed critically by many outside Africa, as well as by some within the AU, appearing to shore up Gaddafi's crumbling regime, but was an expression of an independent and rule-based stance by the regional body nonetheless¹⁷.

The prominence of the AU internationally has developed in close relationship to the emergence of an increased prominence of individual African states in a number of multilateral and bilateral contexts such as the WTO and climate change negotiations. Arguably, however, a few key states making the running. Chief among these is one of the continent's 'pivotal powers'¹⁸ – South Africa – which has led African interventions in the WTO, climate change negotiations and in a variety of emerging 'south-south' coalitions (such as the India-Brazil-South Africa group)¹⁹. More generally, South Africa, together with Nigeria, has been the focus of African participation in G8 and G20 summitry and successfully promoted a 'partnership' agenda with western states. The 'golden age of African diplomacy'²⁰ between 1998 and 2008 saw developed countries enter into a series of commitments on aid, trade and debt in return for African pledges on economic and governance reform. Seats at the table for leading African states carry with them their own diplomatic headaches, however, with attendant problems in South Africa's case of needing to speak for 'Africa', for 'southern Africa', as well as for its own national interests²¹.

Differentiation between African states has also become prominent in bilateral relations. In the aid field the era of 'post-conditionality'²² has seen considerable divergence in African states' relations with donors. Uganda, Ethiopia and Rwanda in particular have shown an ability to exert increasing ownership over aid agendas and priorities²³. In Rwanda's case the country has seen considerable success in coordinating DAC donors to its priorities²⁴ whereas Uganda's efforts at 'perception management' has seen it maintain DAC aid flows despite increasing criticism of its domestic political situation²⁵. Such examples reinforce Taylor's assessment: 'Contra to the notion that Africa is a passive bystander in global processes, African elites have proven themselves excellent arch-manipulators of the international system'²⁶. Both cases present questions as to how far simplistic notions of the power of donor conditionality – and assumptions of the dominance of western actors – are accurate in cases where states have shown they can exert agency based on national sovereign authority²⁷.

In both multilateral and bilateral contexts, the degree of increased African assertiveness as well as the political content and purpose of such action, has been heavily influenced by key political leaders. Interpretation of state agency therefore needs to be informed by an awareness of the role of African state leaders as both actors defining as well as mediating the external expression of state preferences. For Landsberg, the ‘golden age’ relied heavily on the particular foreign policy strategies and vision of a few key leaders, South Africa’s Mbeki and Nigeria’s Obasanjo in particular²⁸. But in many arenas leaders leave a particularly heavy stamp on states’ foreign policies and inter-personal politics have played a significant role in the opposition to NATO intervention in Libya in 2011, the absence of African intervention in Cote d’Ivoire in 2010-11 and in southern Africa’s softly-softly handling of the Zimbabwe crisis²⁹.

In a variety of fields, non-state actors also bring another dimension to the consideration of African agency. While clearly central to any political activity, the specific role of African non-state actors in international politics takes a number of forms. On the one hand, non-state agencies of various kinds form the constituencies of interest to which state leaders must relate and thus have a role in shaping state preferences and the external actions of those leaders. On the other hand, they also interact more directly with ‘external’ international agencies and organisations. In a number of fields, the ‘new’ ‘security’ issues of environment, health and migration in particular, the cooperation or participation of non-state actors as groups or individuals is necessary for the successful implementation of international policy. This has been documented in the HIV/AIDS field³⁰ as well as in analyses of the barriers to translating intergovernmental declarations on peacekeeping and conflict prevention early warning systems into effective action on the ground³¹. More generally, through changing patterns of social behaviour, they also have a role in the shaping of these policy fields in the first place, even being the ‘securitising agents’ acting ‘from the bottom up’. A case of this is in South Africa, where xenophobic community-based violence towards Zimbabwean migrants in 2008 ‘securitised’ the issue contributing to a shift in South Africa’s foreign policy towards Zimbabwe³².

Lastly, as agents attempting more far reaching political change across the continent, non-state actors influence both the institutions through which other agents seek to act as well as the perceptions of the continent’s political trajectory inside and outside Africa. Whether such activity – which included protests and demonstrations in over a dozen sub-Saharan African countries in 2011 – amounted to the beginnings of ‘an African spring’, is open to debate. Nevertheless, as the ‘north African’ spring showed, such political convulsions have an impact on the shape of the international system as well as on domestic political arrangements³³. Indeed, a focus on agency in all its forms may help to redress the surprise and shock at the turn of events, so evident in responses to the ‘Arab Spring’, which itself was born of ‘the tendency of numerous researchers to focus only on structures, institutions and other mechanisms of power without taking into account the forms of resistance they provoke’³⁴.

3. Unpacking agency

This overview of political action by ‘Africa’ in international politics describes a very broad field. In order to focus this more usefully I pose two overlapping questions. On the one hand

there is a quasi-quantitative question: ‘how much’ agency are African political actors able to enact? This raises substantive analytical problems around the degree of influence or power such agents are able to exert, their room for manoeuvre, and the identification of those factors that constrain or enable such agency. A second, more qualitative question lies close by: ‘what kind’ of agency is being enacted? This in turn raises analytical issues about the nature of such agency, its political purposes and content and the ways such agency is shaped socially. To develop analysis in response to both ‘how much’ and ‘what kind’ questions, it is clear that the meaning of the concept of agency itself becomes an issue. This section explores how one might conceptualise agency in a way that allows us to approach both forms of the question of agency.

As Colin Wight has noted, in much IR literature, and as I have used it thus far, agency is taken to mean something akin to ‘the faculty or state of acting or exerting power’³⁵. Indeed, at some levels of abstraction, for some analytical purposes (particularly in response to ‘how much’ questions), this kind of ‘rule of thumb’ approach has some use. We do learn something about Africa’s interaction with the international system by asking whether a range of African actors are exerting more influence internationally and about the causal factors that make this possible or limit its extent. However, as the discussion above shows, once we recognise that in acting internationally, even through what at first sight looks like singular African agencies like the AU, the agency at work is both shaped by other internal and external actors and is acting in relation to wider political and social constraints. Simple notions of a singular African agency, and of agency simply as the exertion of power or influence, start to seem less adequate to the task. Here a more nuanced notion of agency is needed, one that can accommodate the variety of entities to which the label agent can be applied, to differentiate between them, and that can locate agency in relation to the social contexts from which it arises and which shape, enable and constrain it.

3.1 Dimensions of agency

In the discussion that follows, I argue that Colin Wight’s work on agency provides a useful starting point from which to build a fuller account of African agency in today’s international politics. Wight has been at the forefront of discussions of agency in international politics, engaging with notions of agency arising from the work of Alexander Wendt among others. With the exception of Wendt, Wight maintains that ‘I am aware of no systematic [IR] disciplinary treatment of the concept of agency’³⁶. I give a very truncated and schematic account of one aspect of Wight’s approach as a basis for thinking through both the ‘how much’ and ‘what kind’ questions of African agency. However, following that I suggest two further steps. The first is to add a qualification to Wight’s account of agency in order to clarify a distinction between state, or state-based agencies and others; and second, to consider the need to historicise the account of African agency.

Wight argues that any social agency has a tripartite character³⁷. First, there is the notion of agency in the sense most commonly used, of a ‘freedom of subjectivity’ in action, but defined also as involving both meaning and intentionality³⁸. This is the irreducibly human aspect to agency and through which ‘anything that happens in society’ must travel. This insistence on the *human* basis for agency is a guiding notion for Wight, based on Bhaskar’s

claim that ‘nothing happens in society save in virtue of something human beings do or have done’³⁹. Granting states (or any other structured entities) a *personality* (as Wendt does⁴⁰) transgresses on this basic, and widely shared, premise. While Wight has some sympathy with Buzan’s notion of agency involving ‘acting’ and ‘exerting power’, he argues that this misses key dimensions of human agency, particularly the importance of agents’ injection of meaning and intentionality into action⁴¹. States, in this view, only enact their agency in the sense of acting through human agents – individuals, groups and organisations – though exactly how they do this is an important point I will return to below.

This first dimension of agency speaks to the idea of agency as ‘doing something’ and accounts of agency in this form answer parts of both the ‘how much’ and ‘what kind’ questions: how much subjective freedom of action is being exercised and what is it that agents are doing with that freedom of subjectivity? However, going further in answering these questions brings us to the second and third dimensions of agency. The second dimension, for Wight, is more akin to the notion of agency as ‘being an agent of something’ as ‘bearers’ of the context from which they originate. Here Wight seems to have in mind the wider socio-cultural setting as well as personal histories, backgrounds and social conditioning, that shape agency. This is a broad category and is directed towards identifying the enablements and constraints of any agency – ‘the power agents accumulate by virtue of their positioning within a social context’ which varies over time and according to different contexts⁴².

Finally, agents are positioned within particular roles, which may or may not be formally ascribed and which themselves may empower or constrain choices open to them. In our survey above, this helps to describe aspects of agency that pertain, in the more formal sense, to the roles of leader, diplomat, negotiator, representative, but also, in a less formal sense to constituent, advocate or protestor. Any particular example of agency thus has a tripartite character and invocations of agency always involve all three: there are neither simply free individuals, nor script-defined role performance but both roles and subjectivity shaped in extent and content, by and operating within a specific social context. All three need to be considered together according to Wight and the precise way in which they combine cannot be determined abstractly but only in analysis of concrete examples⁴³.

One of the attractive aspects of this orientation towards agency is the way that through each dimension it inscribes within the notion of agency itself the wider, structural contexts within which it occurs. As Wight notes, ‘...we need to think of agency as always structurally embedded yet distinct from those structures that enable and constrain it...’⁴⁴. Rosenberg has made a similar point, claiming that whereas structure is a device for exploring the emergent properties and accumulated practices and consequences of human agency; similarly ‘there is no such thing as ‘extra-structural’ agency’. But the implications cut both ways. ‘To reserve agency only to describe action in opposition to established practice (structure) is to evacuate from the concept of structure exactly that reproductive and sequential agency whose patterns and results the concept [structure] exists to delineate’⁴⁵. Put more crudely, agency needs to be seen as both creative and reproductive of existing structural relationships as well as, potentially at least, transformative of them. Unlike more thoroughgoing structuralist accounts which obscure agency, and the more thoroughgoing methodological individualist accounts of international politics which deny a causal role to structures⁴⁶ here is a notion of agency that is

structurally embedded. In Wight's neat phrase, '...agents always bring their structures with them'⁴⁷.

When looking at any particular instance of African agency, we are therefore called upon to give an account that recognises the subjective freedom of the agents concerned, whether abstracted as states or organisations, or as more individualised actors, but viewed both in the sense of the roles they are performing and the social contextual constraints that inform that subjectivity. In describing different examples of agency – state leader, diplomat, negotiator, socially-located individuals and groups – part of our account needs to be about the subjective freedom involved but also the roles being filled and the socio-cultural contexts which inform and constrain that agency, '...the conditions of possibility for any social act...' as Wight puts it⁴⁸.

A key example of African agency can be used to illustrate these points. The AU's actions in response to the Libya crisis – criticising the UN-sanctioned NATO intervention⁴⁹, launching its own high-level diplomatic mission to broker a ceasefire and initial non-recognition of the new regime – was notable for the extent to which it stood out from the route pursued by the dominant powers⁵⁰. The political 'space' for this initiative relied in large part on the prior groundwork done in founding the AU as a collective voice of the continent, building the regional organisation and enacting a series of principles regarding intervention and the non-recognition of regimes that come to power through the use of force. The agency exercised was therefore around the precise ways in which this role of mediator, defined expressly as an 'African' role, was taken forward in the delegation headed by South Africa's Jacob Zuma and steered by the AU Chairperson Jean Ping. Nevertheless, both the extent of room for manoeuvre that opened up, the use of it and the results of the exercise were shaped by wider political contexts.

These included, first, the external conditions which confronted the attempt at mediation, not least the military power of NATO and the drift of events on the ground in Libya which proved to be more decisive. When taken 'quantitatively' therefore, both the high level diplomatic mission and the AU deliberations on whether and when to recognise the National Transitional Council in Libya were illustrations of the limitations on African agency. However, more 'qualitatively' the AU responses can be read in terms of how 'internal' histories and backgrounds informed how the AU pursued this diplomatic strategy. These included the history of Libya's involvement in the creation of the AU and Gaddafi's continuing influence in the rest of the continent, personal loyalties to Gaddafi of key African leaders such as Uganda's Museveni (represented on the high level mission by his foreign minister and a very prominent voice calling for an 'African solution'), and the ways in which the AU's own norms helped to define a particular kind of role for its representatives in response to the uprising and its aftermath⁵¹. These factors have proved very controversial, even within Africa, with many states criticising the AU's response, particularly over the slow recognition of the new government in Libya. Where more conventional accounts would tell us a story simply of external powers (yet again) determining African realities, a focus on agency at least invites us to engage seriously with the ways in which political actors, acting on behalf of an 'African collectivity', tried to utilise such space as was available to them, to respond to the crisis. It also allows us to engage with actual political debates that have arisen around what different courses of action might have been taken in the circumstances.

In this case and in others I have touched on in the previous section⁵², Wight's notion of agency doesn't substantively settle key analytical issues such as the relative balance between, say, personal attributes, domestic political pressures and external system level constraints, but it does provide a framework within which these causal factors can begin to be located in relation to each other. Moreover, approaching these issues from the standpoint of agency, itself facilitates a serious engagement with the political content of these instances of Africa's participation in the international political arena.

3.2 States and agency

These considerations highlight a tension in the discussion so far regarding different forms of agency, in particular the differentiation that is needed between state-based forms of agency and the other, non-state forms. In much of the discussion so far, I have talked, in 'academic shorthand'⁵³, of African states having agency and at the same time asserted the importance of human agents as 'bearers of' the social context from which they arise and within which they operate. If Wight's consideration of agency is broadly accepted, then, following Jessop, one should note that 'it is not the state which acts: it is always specific sets of politicians and state officials located in specific parts of the state system'⁵⁴. As a result, Wight argues (contra Wendt) against the notion of the state as an actual 'person'. Wendt argued that states are persons, having a theoretical understanding of their activities; supplying reasons for their behaviour; monitoring and adapting their behaviour and making decisions – a form of 'collective consciousness'⁵⁵. The state, as such is a particular type of structure that emerges into an corporate agent because of these features.

In contrast, Wight argues there is a distinction to be made (one Wendt misses) between corporate and collective agency, where the latter is unproblematic (individuals acting collectively and having an often enhanced agency as a result) but which cannot be applied easily to the state. Instead, following Marx, the state for Wight is a 'complex institutional ensemble'⁵⁶. As a 'structural ensemble' the state can have causality and be legally accountable but it is not itself a person⁵⁷. However, while '...structures are responsible for some element of agential outcomes'⁵⁸ states exert that agency only through the actions of socially-embedded and role-performing groups and individuals: 'As such, the state itself does not exercise power, but facilitates the exercise of power by state agents...structurally-located political actors...It is only these agents... who bring into play specific powers and state capacities that are inscribed in particular state institutions that act'⁵⁹. As such, abstracting the state as an agent may work for certain analytical purposes but cannot account for phenomena whose causality resides elsewhere in the social world⁶⁰.

So far, this seems a reasonable way of handling this tension. Where difficulty arises in Wight's framework, is in differentiating such 'state-enabled' agencies from any other. Here Wight's account seems to oscillate between an insistence on the uniqueness of the state, and assertions that there is nothing to distinguish its structures (and hence the agents located within or empowered by it) from any other. Important consequences flow from this, not least whether the distinction between an 'inside' and 'outside' in IR any longer obtains. As Wight puts it, '...no organisation can be considered wholly autonomous and independent of external structural influences. When applied to the state, this fact alone should lead us to treat with

suspicion artificial boundaries separating inside from outside, or dividing the world into artificial levels'⁶¹.

Yet Wight is more equivocal than this statement implies. On the one hand, 'although the state plays a unique role in a given society it is not simply one among equals. The state is the pre-eminent institutional structure'⁶² and that '...the state is still characterised by its distinctive structural make-up that endows it with a unique set of powers, properties and liabilities'⁶³. On the other hand he claims, '...the distinction between domestic and international structures seems untenable'⁶⁴. But then he goes on to say that: 'States are only one institutional form among many...' and that we should be analysing 'global social relations, not international relations, the state system is a (powerful) chimera'⁶⁵. Franke and Roos seem to back Wight up here, arguing '...in spite of its longstanding predominance, the state is *nothing but* one kind of structure of corporate practice among many others within the international realm...' including, they add, international organisations, NGOs and terrorist organisations⁶⁶.

The key ingredient that is missing from these claims, and which helps to resolve the specific difference of 'state-enabled' agents from others, is sovereignty. Indeed, contrary to the quotes in the preceding paragraph, at one point Wight notes: '...sovereignty, as a constitutive rule of international order, is both the medium, and outcome, of the internal and external practices of states. It provides the very meaning of what is internal and what is external and is constitutive of the identities and interests of agents involved'⁶⁷. Moreover, in reference to Wight's earlier point as to the state's 'unique powers' and 'pre-eminent position' it is precisely the claim to sovereignty which lies at the heart of this uniqueness.

The case for keeping sovereignty at the heart of any account of Africa's international relations has been argued at greater length elsewhere⁶⁸ but some key points are worth reiterating in this context. Sovereignty should be seen as a claim to the location of ultimate authority, to a socially-recognised right to rule⁶⁹. As such it puts the state, and the institutions that comprise it and agents who are empowered to act on its behalf, in a class apart from all others in society. Indeed, not only does the state's imprimatur constrain or enable other embodied agents to act⁷⁰ but in enabling state agencies or individuals fulfilling state-based roles to act as state-authorized agents, it endows them with a status and power different from others. So not only does sovereignty serve to maintain the inside/outside distinction it is also the principle through which states themselves perform their agency, exert power, and play roles internationally enacted by their agents.

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 African leaders and diplomats have to attend and participate in the varied multilateral forums and bilateral relations surveyed earlier⁷¹. As a result, the state, as Taylor notes, 'is a foundational element' in studying the international relations of sub-Saharan Africa⁷². 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'⁷³) 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 other actors both internally and in some circumstances externally. No non-state actor has the same kind of agency, backed by a claim to ultimate authority, in any of the arenas I have discussed.

That is certainly not to say that non-state actors are irrelevant. Sovereignty defined in this way is irreducibly relational and highly politicised in many respects⁷⁴. It is based on claims and recognition, and is both historically variable in form and content and an ongoing 'project'. As Wight notes, 'There is never a point when the state project is completed within a given territory and thereafter operates according to its own fixed and inevitable logic'⁷⁵. Both the form and content of sovereignty, and the uses of sovereign power, are therefore something that are continually made and remade within the broad area of what one might refer to as 'state-society complexes' – the relations between those claiming sovereign authority and those over whom it is claimed – and the arena of the state system itself. Nor is the role of non-state agencies, either from within a given state or without it, set in stone by states but is contested and negotiated.

Sovereignty is therefore a critical element of our explanation of African agency, directing our attention to the rules and norms that enable African states to have a place in many of the crucial international arenas. However, it also plays an important role in organising the ability of agents to speak on behalf of broader sets of actors – community, 'nation' or, in the case of the AU, Africa as a whole. It also asks of us an account of the principles of representation⁷⁶ and the authority claims on which they rest, as well as the more earthy world of political power that leaders and state representatives are engaged in. Accounts of these important aspects of the exercise of state agency, and particularly how they become established and evolve over time, draws us inevitably into questions of the temporal dimensions of African agency.

4. Agency and historical conjuncture

The account of African agency so far outlined suggests two analytical tasks – a need to account for the degree or extent of agency seen in terms of the ability to exercise subjective freedom of action, or 'agency as doing something'; and a need to account for the social and political content of that agency seen in terms of the roles being filled and the social context within which agency arises, or agency as 'being an agent of something'. However, lying within these ideas is another layer that also needs to be drawn out. As is clear from the survey of African agency in this paper, the issue, as with any discussion of agency, is dynamic, not just in terms of the tensions between the expression of agency and continuing structural constraints in a 'snapshot' sense, but also how this tension plays out over time. Indeed, to return to Rosenberg's point above, the historical inheritance is implicit in the very concept of structure seen as the accumulation of past agency. Perhaps over-used but still worth noting, in Marx's famous quote, this relationship between past practice and present-day agency is clear: 'Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living'⁷⁷. Thus while it is true that, as Mamdani put it and as I have explored above, '...it is only when abstracted from structural constraint that agency appears as lacking

in historical specificity...'⁷⁸ the reverse is also the case, namely, that accounting for historical specificity is also a large part of the analytical task of identifying structural constraints. More generally, situating agency within a 'thicker' historical account is necessary in order to breathe life into the useful but rather abstract categories of agency (and the issue of sovereignty) discussed so far. Although I have suggested that such categories can be helpful in organising our analysis of particular instances of African agency, these in turn need to be located within a broader narrative.

Emirbayer and Mische⁷⁹ make a similar point in their sociological discussion of agency, arguing that agency is not just structurally embedded but also temporally-embedded process. In contrast to some accounts which emphasise agency as only 'future-oriented' and concerned with 'changing the inherited predicament' (as de Bruijn et al put it⁸⁰), Emirbayer and Mische argue that any instance of agency is oriented towards past, present and future and in ways that may be reproductive as much as transformative. As they summarise, agency is, '...informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)'⁸¹.

In fact, this is an issue that has been explored more fully in historical studies of Africa, focussed on efforts to 'recover the history and agency of the subaltern' as Cooper puts it⁸², than in IR discussions of Africa⁸³. Early post-independence histories of Africa attempted this through an emphasis on the role of African resistance to colonialism⁸⁴. In historical studies, perhaps ironically, it was some on the radical end of the spectrum, in both dependency and Marxian guises in the 1970s, who often did most to side-line agency within overly structuralist accounts of the role of the international economy⁸⁵. As Terrence Ranger put it, 'The African historian...who emphasizes African activity, African adaptation, African choice, African initiative, will increasingly find his main adversaries not in the discredited colonial school but in the radical pessimists'⁸⁶. In more recent times, those Afro-pessimistic accounts which emphasise the over-dominance of international donors and financial institutions or the role of a disembodied 'neo-liberalism' in determining African outcomes, fall into a similar trap⁸⁷.

In bringing history into our study of African agency in today's international politics, we can get some pointers from these debates. In reviewing the debates on colonialism Cooper argued that the challenge was to 'confront the power behind European expansion without assuming it was all-determining...', finding African agency 'in all its complexity, contingency and limitations' rather than the 'flattening of the complex lives of real people'⁸⁸. Better historical narratives Cooper argued, got at some of the ebb and flow of initiative and resistance: not just a story of African resistance to a dominant Europe but of adaptation of European colonial policy to resistance by the colonized⁸⁹.

In a similar vein, Mamdani warned of the need avoid treating history as following a pre-given route 'unaffected by the struggles that happened along the way', leaving both African and the developed world 'robbed of their history'⁹⁰. Moreover, while structuralist accounts 'straightjacket agency within iron laws of history' a strong tendency in poststructuralism is 'to diminish the significance of historical constraint in the name of salvaging agency'⁹¹. In some more fanciful post-structuralist versions, African insertion into the world economy,

even slavery, is down purely to African initiative: ‘It is one thing to argue that nothing short of death can extinguish human initiative and creativity’ Mamdani warns, ‘but quite another to see in every gesture evidence of historical initiative...’⁹².

In attempting to meet these challenges in the analysis of contemporary African agency in international politics we need to be able to account for two different historical registers. First, an assessment of the current historical conjuncture and what agents seek to do with such subjective freedom as exists. Second, to situate this within longer-term historical trajectories of state formation and insertion into the international system that continue to inform many of the constraints on that agency. Inevitably, the latter tends towards a greater emphasis on structural constraint than the former, yet any historical account would be failing if the agential production of those constraints slips from view entirely⁹³ and no account of the current conjuncture can ignore the very real constraints that continue to impinge on African agency. Four facets of contemporary African agency illustrate the point here: the systemic setting, the agency of leaders, questions of capacity, and the role of discourses.

One of the more notable arenas in which African actors have made their presence felt in the international arena is the WTO. African negotiators have adopted a series of strategies to increase their influence within the WTO, utilising the power of numbers to get increased representation on key committees and more active participation in the Doha Development Round⁹⁴. Even if such influence tends to be a negative one – as one African negotiator put it, ‘We have learnt to ask why, we have learnt to ask how, and we have learnt to say “No”’⁹⁵ – nevertheless it is a marked change from previous decades. While these agents have utilised such negotiating space, discourses and resources as are available to them, their ability to do so is heavily influenced by the tectonic shifts in the international system caused by the rise of new powers and the move to a more multi-polar world. In a context in which hegemony by the leading states no longer holds sway unchallenged in multilateral forums, numbers count for more, allowing African states to utilise their numerical weight to gain greater voice⁹⁶. The impact of this conjuncture has been general, 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’⁹⁷. Indeed, the impact has also been felt on bilateral aid relations, enhancing the scope for African bargaining enabling some states to take much tougher stances towards western donors⁹⁸. However, in terms of our second register, this conjunctural account needs to be located within the longer histories by which African states have been incorporated into the world economy. It is this history that continues to confront today’s agents in the form of underdevelopment, lack of diversification, marginalisation from key markets and reliance on volatile primary product exports. These are key conditions that shape African stances in WTO negotiations. Whether contemporary change in the international system can significantly alter these inherited conditions remains to be seen.

I have also noted above the prominent role of state leaders – Taylor’s ‘arch manipulators of the international system’⁹⁹ – in defining African participation in international politics. Here too, a particular confluence of events, and personal characteristics of key leaders, gave this a new edge, direction and impact¹⁰⁰. Indeed, one doesn’t have to sign up to all of the arguments about ‘personal rule’¹⁰¹ to see that inter-personal relations among leaders are important to expressions of African agency in international politics. Yet even the agency of leaders is

shaped by the relationships of power between governments and their societies. As Taylor points out, ‘Critically analysing the modalities of governance in large parts of [sub-Saharan Africa] and how they combine with external processes is essential if we wish to comprehend diplomatic practices, global interactions and broad international relations of Africa’s elites and ordinary citizens’¹⁰². But such modalities of governance are themselves shaped by longer histories to do with how those political systems came into being, the wider processes of state formation which unfolded and trajectories of political reform and social change that have affected them. Important too are the histories of how those states were incorporated into the international system both through the displacement of pre-colonial African international relations with imperial systems and the subsequent inclusion and metamorphosis into the modern international system¹⁰³. Crucially the latter included the rise of new norms of sovereignty and multilateralism that still inform much of African states’ participation in international politics. For many African leaders these longer and shorter-term histories create something of a dual imperative for today’s agents based around the twin pressures of economic development and regime security¹⁰⁴. In this the search for revenue and external political support, whether for national developmental projects or to oil the wheels of power, is a constant feature of African (and maybe all) international relations but assumes critical importance for those regimes that are more dependent on clientelist-type political relationships¹⁰⁵.

A similar background also impinges on the more functional aspects of African states’ capacity to participate in international negotiations. In terms of African agency in the WTO and climate change negotiations, much attention has focussed on issues of bureaucratic resources, policy development and analysis and negotiating presence¹⁰⁶. Such factors also arise in the security field where limited military and bureaucratic capacity remain a severe restraint on the pursuit of ‘African solutions to African problems’ and in facilitating the AU’s efforts at mediation¹⁰⁷. Although such limitations can be placed within a short time-frame focussed on the negative impact of the adjustment years on the fabric of African states, these are not purely, or perhaps even primarily, ‘technical’ issues, amenable to a programme of restorative international funding and NGO training courses and staff development (though they maybe that too). More, they are symptoms of the longer-standing processes of state formation with all the particularities that has involved in Africa.

Even the more discursive aspects affecting African agency need to be historically located. This is most obvious in the utilisation of the very term ‘Africa’ by African politicians and external actors. This has been most commented on in the case of western donors. For example Blair’s invocation of ‘the state of *Africa*’ in 2001 played a very particular role within the contingencies of the then Labour government’s foreign policy and domestic political concerns but itself was situated within a longer-standing British and colonial discourses on Africa¹⁰⁸. However, the uses of ‘Africa’ have been an important part of African leaders’ diplomacy as well, most notably in South Africa’s post-apartheid foreign policy where Mandela’s discourse of ‘*African* solidarity’ and Mbeki’s ‘*African* renaissance’ have framed much of the actions of this pivotal power’s foreign policy¹⁰⁹. The immediate matching up of these two – western and African – did much to propel the new ‘bargain’ between donors and Africa in the run up to the G8 Gleneagles summit in 2005 but also continued a longer history of liberal-influenced interactions between Africa and Europe¹¹⁰.

In all these areas, and others a proper account of agency today needs to identify how the accumulations of past practice are present in the everyday realities facing contemporary agents. In contrast to the laughably 19th Century view of the French President – ‘The tragedy of Africa is that the African has never really entered into history...’¹¹¹ – these past practices every bit as much as today’s, are the product of African agency as well as that of external powers. Part of our judgment of agency today needs to address the extent to which it is challenging or reinforcing such inherited practice.

5. Conclusion: still ‘agency in tight corners’?

In an international system marked by dramatic change, the rise of African agency has attracted renewed attention. Two opposite responses are invited: one is a voluntaristic celebration of such agency as if all structural constraints had fallen away, the other an insistence that nothing has changed, that the ‘big structures’ of global inequality remain unaltered and Africa perpetually dominated. As a result prognoses on Africa flip between extremes: ‘hemmed in’ or ‘seizing the 21st Century’; ‘hopeless’ or ‘hopeful’¹¹². As I have argued in this article, an approach to agency that emphasises its multiple dimensions means that neither extreme is likely to capture the complexity of Africa’s recent interaction with the international system.

In his introduction to a retrospective special issue on the work of African historian Terrence Ranger, John Lonsdale wrote of how Ranger’s work introduced us to ‘morally determined, intellectually convinced, pioneers of a new Africa’, who, in freeing the continent from colonial rule and fashioning new states in the post-war world, exercised their agency ‘in tight corners’¹¹³. In considering the agency of African political actors in today’s international politics we are in many ways still engaged in analysing the interplay between the makers of history and the tight corners from which they originate and within which they operate.

Neither voluntarist emphasis on agency alone, nor a structural pessimism, gets to grips with the structurally- and temporally-embedded nature of agency. Nor can either engage seriously enough with the sheer variability of African agency on an issue by issue basis. Different expressions of agency and different contexts provide for very different assessments. Indeed it has been the overarching argument of this article that it is by focussing on agency in its varied forms and contexts that we are forced to engage seriously with this complex picture of how African political actors try to navigate their international relations. None of the expressions of African political agency that I have covered operate outwith a complex and varied mix of geopolitical, domestic institutional, developmental, and ideational contexts. Such factors frame the ‘conditions of possibility’ of African agency with highly differentiated and at times contradictory impacts. More work remains to be done in order to realise the potential that a focus on African agency holds for a new approach to studying African’s international relations. However, a number of hypotheses do suggest themselves from this initial work.

First, the ‘external conditions of possibility’ for agency are varied, issue-specific and mixed. This seems to be the case in the sense that the room for manoeuvre available to African actors is dependent on rather particular configurations of power and interest internationally. While

African agency has been notable in WTO and climate change negotiations, and while both arenas are affected by systemic shifts in polarity, there are also more particular, issue-specific opportunities and obstacles in operation. Even then, in the WTO case, an increase in African influence is counteracted by a side-lining of the WTO and a shift to mini and bilateral negotiations¹¹⁴. The room for manoeuvre in the area of security and peacekeeping is arguably more limited, affected by whether outside powers are engaged or not, and the limits of African military and political capacity. Such opportunities are also affected by the discourses utilised by agents inside and outside the continent. In the realm of ‘new security’ issues like health, environment and migration, the effect of securitising discourses is also hotly debated, seeming to enhance resources and voice for ‘Africa’ but also casting such ‘problems’ in a very particular, often disempowering, light¹¹⁵. The use of the term ‘Africa’ itself can galvanise action (as used by Mbeki and Blair in the years before 2005) but also marginalise the continent as a ‘distant other’¹¹⁶. The argument for a focus on agency is in part an attempt to challenge narratives of Africa that present the entire continent as perpetual victim and lacking political initiative and engage seriously with the more fine-grain detail.

Second, the collective presence of Africa in international politics is very much a work in progress. Although the AU has made significant steps forward, critical limits remain. Ultimately the collective agency of Africa can only ‘make numbers count’ where national interests genuinely align behind a common position¹¹⁷. Compromise and fudge for the sake of signing up to a high level declaration, or a more sentimental notion of continental solidarity, do not make for an effective negotiating stance when the continent comes up against the major powers and intra-continental tensions have shown themselves in both UN reform and climate change arenas¹¹⁸.

Third, sovereignty matters for African agency. While it is absolutely the case that the study of African agency can and does go far beyond the study of states, for the sake of conceptual clarity and the study of practical politics, a distinction has to be maintained between those agents who carry the sovereign imprimatur of the state and those who do not or who challenge this authority. Indeed, possession of such authority is a major component of the social power that African agents are able to carry internationally. Having said that, sovereignty itself is inherently relational in both its internal and external aspects, meaning that state actors are never divorced in a substantive sense from non-state actors. This also alerts us to the importance of processes of authorisation by and representation of the state in the analysis of any form of agency and the politics around those processes¹¹⁹.

Finally, though the contingencies of today’s rapidly changing international system are important in defining the conditions of possibility for African agency, longer-term histories also weigh heavily. Those in power in African states, endowed with the power and freedom of action furnished by sovereign authority have to marry the external exercise of that agency with meeting the political necessities of ruling unevenly- and under- developed, rapidly changing societies. Despite the increased space created by tectonic shifts in the international arena, and the additional scope for action that creates, the agency of African leaders, Africa collectively, and even more those excluded from the seats of power, is still operating in the tight corners bequeathed by these longer histories of state formation and incorporation into the international system.

Endnotes

- ¹ This article and much of the work on which it is based and which it cites, arises from an ESRC funded research seminar series, *African Agency in International Politics* which ran throughout 2011, see <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/bisa-africa/african-agency/> for further details. My thanks to Sophie Harman, who was principal investigator of the seminar series and to numerous participants who contributed to the discussions and commented on an earlier version of this paper.
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- ³ As Callaghy and Ravenhill put it in 1993, Callaghy, T. M. and J. Ravenhill, Eds. *Hemmed In: Responses to Africa's Economic Decline*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1993
- ⁴ Mamdani, M *Citizen and Subject: contemporary Africa and the legacy of later colonialism* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, p.10-11
- ⁵ Ingebritsen, C, Neuman, I, Sieglinde, G and Beyer, J *Small states in International Relations* Seattle: University of Washington Press; Reykjavik: University of Iceland Press, 2006; Higgott, R 'Toward a non-hegemonic IPE: an Antipodean perspective', in C Murphy & R Tooze, *The New International Political Economy*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991; Lee, D and Smith, N J 'Small state discourses in the international political economy' *Third World Quarterly* 31 (7) pp. 1091-1105
- ⁶ See for example Clapham, C. *Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996; Also Bayart J-F *The State in Africa: the politics of the belly* London: Longman 1993
- ⁷ Wight, C *Agents and Structures in International Relations Theory: Politics as Ontology* (Cambridge University Press), 2006
- ⁸ Among many possible examples, see: C. Clapham *Africa and the International System*; Dunn, K C and Shaw, T M (eds.) *Africa's Challenge to International Relations Theory* Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001; Harrison, G *Neoliberal Africa: the impact of global social engineering* London: Zed Books 2010; Taylor, I and Williams, P D (eds.) *Africa in International Politics: external involvement on the continent* London: Routledge, 2004; Taylor, I *The International Relations of sub-Saharan Africa* New York: Continuum 2010; Williams, D *The World Bank and Social Transformation in International Politics: liberalism, governance and sovereignty* Abingdon: Routledge, 2008; Brown, W 'Africa and International relations Theory: a comment on anarchy and statehood' *Review of International Studies* 32 (1) 2006 pp119-143
- ⁹ See for overview: Lonsdale, J 'Agency in tight corners: narrative and initiative in African history' *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 13 (1), 2000, pp. 5-16; Cooper, F 'Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History,' *The American Historical Review* 99 (5), 1994, pp.1516-1545; Kolapo, F J and Akurang-Parry, K O (eds.) *African Agency and European Colonialism: latitudes of negotiation and containment* Lanham, My: University Press of America, 2007; Mamdani, M *Citizen and Subject*
- ¹⁰ de Bruijn, M, van Dijk, R and Gewald, J 'Social and historical trajectories of agency in Africa'. In: Chabal et al (eds.) *African Alternatives* Leiden, Brill, 2007, pp.9-20
- ¹¹ Wight, C *Agents and Structures in International Relations Theory*
- ¹² Harrison, G *Neoliberal Africa* p.14-18

- ¹³ Zondi, S ‘Africa in Multilateral Negotiations: A Critique of African Common Positions’ (paper presented to the seminar, *Emerging Agents of Change? Africa in International Negotiations*, Chatham House, London, February 3rd 2011).
- ¹⁴ Zondi, S ‘Africa in Multilateral Negotiations’; Hoste, J C ‘Where was united Africa in the Climate Change negotiations?’ *Africa Policy Brief*, Egmont Institute, Belgium, 2011, <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/depaftr.html> (Accessed 2 March 2011); Hoste, J C and Anderson, A ‘African dynamics at the climate change negotiations’ *Africa Policy Brief*, Egmont Institute, Belgium, 2012, <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/depaftr.html> (Accessed 2 March 2012)
- ¹⁵ Engel, U and Porto, J G (eds.) *Africa’s New Peace and Security Architecture: promoting norms, institutionalizing solutions* Farnham: Ashgate, 2010; Ramsbotham, A; Bah, A M S; Calder, F Enhancing African Peace and security: a useful role for the UK and G8? *International Affairs* 81 (2) 2005, pp.325-339
- ¹⁶ Landsberg, C ‘Diffused continentally; undermined abroad?’ (Paper presented to the seminar, African Agency: Implications for IR Theory, City University, London, 14 September 2011)
- ¹⁷ ‘Ping defends AU Libya policy in summit opening statement’ *Voice of America*, 26 January 2012 <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/africa/Ping-Defends-AU-Policy-in-Summit-Opening-Speech-138130508.html>
- ¹⁸ Landsberg, C ‘Diffused continentally; undermined abroad?’
- ¹⁹ Andreasson, S ‘Africa’s prospects and South Africa’s leadership potential in the emerging markets century’ *Third World Quarterly*, 32 (6) 2011, pp1165–1181; Cornelissen, S ‘Awkward embraces: emerging and established powers and the shifting fortunes of Africa’s international relations in the twenty-first century’ *Politikon* 36 (1), 2009, pp.5-26
- ²⁰ Landsberg, C ‘Diffused continentally; undermined abroad?’
- ²¹ See contributions to Adebajo, Adekeye, Adedeji, Adebayo and Landsberg, Chris (eds.) *South Africa in Africa: The Post-apartheid Era*, Scottsville: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2007
- ²² Harrison, G *The World Bank and Africa: the construction of governance states* London: Routledge, 2004
- ²³ Whitfield, L. (Ed.) *The Politics of Aid: African Strategies for Dealing with Donors* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009
- ²⁴ Grimm, S; Hos, H; Knappe, K et al (Eds.) *Coordinating China and DAC Development Partners: challenges to the aid architecture in Rwanda* Bonn: German Development Institute, 2010
- ²⁵ Fisher, J ‘African agency in Continental Intervention: Uganda’s Role in Somalia’ (paper presented to the seminar, *African Agency in International Politics: Peace, Conflict and Intervention*, April 7th 2011)
- ²⁶ Taylor, I *The International Relations of sub-Saharan Africa* p.6
- ²⁷ Brown, W ‘Reconsidering the aid relationship: International Relations and Social Development’ *The Round Table: Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 9 (402) 2009 pp.285-299

- ²⁸ Landsberg, C ‘Diffused continentally; undermined abroad?’
- ²⁹ Lipton, M ‘Understanding South Africa’s Foreign Policy: the perplexing case of Zimbabwe’ *South African Journal of International Affairs* 16 (3) 2009, pp.331-346; Hammerstad, A ‘Securitisation from below’
- ³⁰ Seckinelgin, H ‘HIV/AIDS, Gender and International (In) Security: Reflections on Burundi’ (paper presented to the seminar, *African Agency: Transnational security challenges: migration health and climate change*, University of Kent June 16th 2011); Harman, S *Global Health Governance*, Routledge, 2012
- ³¹ (Kabia 2011)
- ³² Hammerstad, A ‘Securitisation from below’
- ³³ See for example, *African Awakening: the emerging revolutions* (Manji and Ekine 2011). The labeling of the ‘Arab spring’ as ‘Arab’ has itself been a subject for discussion within Africa, the north African countries being separated from the rest of the continent in most accounts of the changes of 2011 while also being very much part of the ‘collective Africa’ represented by the AU.
- ³⁴ Kabia, J ‘Regional Approaches to Peacebuilding: The ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture’ (paper presented to the seminar, *African Agency in International Politics: Peace, Conflict and Intervention* , April 7th 2011)
- ³⁵ Buzan, cited in Wight, C ‘They Shoot Dead Horses Don’t They? Locating Agency in the Agent-Structure Problematique’, *European Journal of International Relations* 5 (1) 1999, pp.109-142
- ³⁶ Wight, C *Agents and Structures in International Relations Theory* p.11
- ³⁷ Ibid p.213-6
- ³⁸ Wight, C ‘They Shoot Dead Horses Don’t They?’ p.126, citing Spivak
- ³⁹ Wight, C *Agents and Structures in International Relations Theory* p.187
- ⁴⁰ Wendt, A ‘The state as person in international relations theory’ *Review of International Studies* 30 (2) 2004, pp.289-316
- ⁴¹ Wight, C ‘State Agency: Social Action without Human Activity’, *Review of International Studies* 30 (2), 2004, p.274. Indeed, this is one way by which an analysis of issues around Africa’s place in the international system which focuses on *agency*, prompts us to engage seriously with the Africa side of this relationship – by asking about the meaning of and intentions and purposes behind actions of African political actors.
- ⁴² Wight, C *Agents and Structures in International Relations Theory* p.212
- ⁴³ Wight, C ‘They Shoot Dead Horses Don’t They?’ p.115
- ⁴⁴ Ibid p.110
- ⁴⁵ Rosenberg, J ‘International Relations – The ‘higher bullshit’. A reply to the Globalisation Theory Debate.’ *International Politics* 44 (4) 2007, pp.450-482

⁴⁶ Which can be summed up as the argument that if the only agency is human agency then everything can ultimately be reduced to and explained by, the accumulations of observable individual behaviour with no causality attributed to structural relationship sat all.

⁴⁷ Wight, C 'They Shoot Dead Horses Don't They?' p.110)

⁴⁸ Wight, C *Agents and Structures in International Relations Theory* p.286)

⁴⁹ Despite African states voting in favour of the initial UNSC resolution 1973

⁵⁰ African Union 'The AU intensifies its efforts towards a political solution in Libya and stresses the importance of the respect for the letter and spirit of resolution 1973' *Press Release*, AU Addis Ababa 3 May 2011 <http://www.au.int/en/content/au-intensifies-its-efforts-towards-political-solution-libya-and-stresses-importance-respect> (Accessed: 3 March 2012)

⁵¹ One western diplomat was quoted as saying, 'The AU peace and security council is weighted with countries who have backed Gaddafi in the past or owe him favours. They will not recognise the NTC'. 'No we still won't recognise Libya's rebels, says Zuma' *Mail and Guardian*, South Africa 26 August 2011 <http://mg.co.za/article/2011-08-26-zuma-cuts-a-lonely-figure-at-aus-libya-powwow> .

⁵² Other examples I touched on in the introduction, would also be illuminated by exploring the different dimensions of the agency at work. For instance in climate change negotiations where the 'external' structure of the negotiations, polarised three ways between the USA, EU and China, in a multilateral setting, allowed a freedom of action for key African leaders (notably Ethiopia, South Africa and Sudan) to give expression to a collective 'African' voice. In this instance, national and local animosities between Ethiopia and Sudan, coupled with the pressures of multiple role-performance on South Africa (as a voice for Africa, for the southern region and for its own national interests) combined to undermine Africa's initial influence at Copenhagen (an influence that has partially been rebuilt in subsequent conferences at Cancun and Durban) Hoste, J C 'Where was united Africa'; Hoste, J C and Anderson, A 'African dynamics'.

⁵³ Williams, D 'African states and IR theory' Paper presented to BISA Annual Conference, 27-29 April 2011, Manchester

⁵⁴ Cited in Wight, C *Agents and Structures in International Relations Theory* pp.187-8

⁵⁵ Wendt, A 'The state as person in international relations theory' *Review of International Studies* 30 (2) 2004, pp.289-316; Wight, C *Agents and Structures in International Relations Theory* p.182

⁵⁶ Ibid pp.184-5

⁵⁷ Ibid pp.194-5

⁵⁸ Ibid p.196

⁵⁹ Ibid p.220

⁶⁰ Ibid p.216-17. Or alternatively, 'The state cannot exercise power independent of those agents that act on its behalf. How far and in what way such powers are realised will depend on the action, reaction and interaction of specific social forces located within and beyond the complex ensemble

[of the state]' p.222.

⁶¹ Ibid p.204

⁶² Ibid p.221

⁶³ Ibid p.223

⁶⁴ Ibid p.292 Although he is surely right that, 'agents are seen to be located within a plurality of structural constraints and enablements, some domestic, some international' p.292.

⁶⁵ Ibid p.299

⁶⁶ Farank, U and Roos, U 'Actor, structure, process: transcending the state personhood debate by means of a pragmatist ontological model for International Relations theory' *Review of International Studies* 36 (3) 2010, pp.1057-1077, p.1065; emphasis added

⁶⁷ Wight, C *Agents and Structures in International Relations Theory* p.293

⁶⁸ Brown, W 'Sovereignty matters: Africa, donors and the aid relationship' 2012, forthcoming

⁶⁹ And therefore is not, at core, about the state's ability to control outcomes, as rather commonly claimed.

⁷⁰ Wight, C *Agents and Structures in International Relations Theory* p.222

⁷¹ Jackson, R. H. *Quasi States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990; Clapham, C. *Africa and the International System*; Mayall, J. *Nationalism and International Society*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990

⁷² Taylor, I *The International Relations of sub-Saharan Africa* p.8

⁷³ For a discussion of the different dimensions of political representation, see Rehfeld, A 'Towards a General Theory of Political Representation.' *The Journal of Politics* 68 (1) 2006, pp.1-21

⁷⁴ Williams, D 'African states and IR theory'

⁷⁵ Wight, C *Agents and Structures in International Relations Theory* p.224

⁷⁶ Rehfeld, A 'Towards a General Theory of Political Representation'

⁷⁷ Marx, K *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1973, [first pub 1852]) p.146

⁷⁸ Mamdani, M *Citizen and Subject*, p.10-11

⁷⁹ Emirbayer, M and Mische, A 'What is agency?' *American Journal of Sociology*, 103 (4) 1998, pp. 962-1023

⁸⁰ de Bruijn et al 'Social and historical trajectories of agency in Africa' p.17

⁸¹ Emirbayer, M and Mische, A 'What is agency?'

⁸² Cooper, F 'Conflict and Connection' p.1517

⁸³ Though it is naturally, a key area of debate in history and in international historical sociology – see Lawson for a survey of the latter field - Lawson, G 'Historical Sociology in International Relations: open society, research programme and vocation' *International Politics* 44 (4) 2007, pp:343-368

⁸⁴ Cooper, F 'Conflict and Connection' p.1520

⁸⁵ Ibid, p.1524

⁸⁶ Lonsdale, J 'Agency in tight corners' p.7

⁸⁷ A point also noted by Chabal, P, Engel, U and de Haan, L (eds.) *African Alternatives* Leiden, Brill 2007

⁸⁸ Cooper, F 'Conflict and Connection' pp.1517-8

⁸⁹ The policy of indirect rule being a good example where the defeat of more transformative European aims, in Mamdani's words, entailed a 'moral and political surrender' of the civilising mission to a law and order one Cooper, F 'Conflict and Connection' p.1531; but see Mamdani, M *Citizen and Subject* in particular for this account.

⁹⁰ Mamdani, M *Citizen and Subject*, p.10

⁹¹ Ibid, p.10

⁹² Ibid, p. 10-11

⁹³ Lawson, G 'Historical Sociology in International Relations

⁹⁴ Lee, D 'Global Trade Governance and the Challenges of African Activism in the Doha Development Agenda Negotiations' *Global Society* 26 (1) 2012, p.94

⁹⁵ Ibid, p.93

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ Zondi, S 'Africa in Multilateral Negotiations' p.4

⁹⁸ Grimm, S et al (Eds.) *Coordinating China and DAC Development Partners* on Rwanda; also see Whitfield, L. (Ed.) *The Politics of Aid*

⁹⁹ Taylor, I *The International Relations of sub-Saharan Africa*

¹⁰⁰ Landsberg, C 'Diffused continentally; undermined abroad?'

¹⁰¹ Jackson, R H and Rosberg, C G 'Personal Rule: theory and practice in Africa' *Comparative Politics* 16 (4) 1984, pp.421-442

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