

## Book Review

Bates, Robert H. (2008), *When Things Fell Apart. State Failure in Late-Century Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Paperback ISBN 9780521715256; Hardback ISBN 9780521887359; 216 pp.

As Bates reminds us with his reference to Chinua Achebe's novel in the title of his book, the question of poverty and development in Africa can be framed in terms of competing narratives. Bates' narrative starts from the premise that "In the latter decades of the 20th century, order gave way to disorder. ... Elites attacked their own citizens, the latter sought to provide their own security, and states failed" (p. 128). The story he tells that leads up to this catastrophic climax goes roughly like this: Up to about 1960, the year when many African countries gained independence, there was political order – defined by Bates as a situation when rulers – characterised as "specialists in violence" – chose to employ the means of coercion to protect the creation of wealth rather than to prey upon it and when private citizens chose to set weapons aside and to devote their time instead to the production of wealth and the enjoyment of leisure (p. 5). "When these choices constitute an equilibrium", he continues, "then ... political order forms a state" (p. 5).

With independence, this happy state of affairs first slowly, and then with increasing speed, got out of balance. Responsible for this, according to Bates, was the authoritarian nature of post-colonial states and their rulers' penchant for predation. In fact, "independence represented the capture of the state by local political elites who then used power to accumulate wealth." (p. 37) As patronage politics under multi-party conditions soon became too expensive, these rulers quickly switched to authoritarian forms of government where the head of state, together with a "minimum winning" coalition (p. 47), controlled both access to material benefits and the means of coercion. Benefits could now be allocated more narrowly, while the cost advantage to politicians of providing benefits in the form of public rather than private goods decreased with the number of clients. "Private benefits drove out public goods as the trade of the coin of the political realm" (p. 52).

In the economic sphere, Bates continues, African governments opted for "control regimes" (p. 55), again out of inherently political motives: control regimes enabled politicians to recruit political dependents. Economically, however, control regimes were costly and "anti-growth" (their cost can even be precisely calculated, at 1,6 % of the annual growth rate ...). While

these policies created benefits for an urban minority, they harmed the interests of most Africans, and, in particular, rural populations.

This politico-economic formation suffered two sharp shocks, namely the economic recession resulting from the oil crisis, and external pressure to democratise as a result of the geo-political realignments after the end of the Cold War. Starting in the 1970s, the overall size of revenues of the authoritarian rulers (mainly from taxes on exports) was eroded, leading to a financial crisis of the state, with the result that public employees began to pay themselves, through corruption or pillage.

The widespread return to multiparty politics in the late 1980s – as a result of popular protests, but also of pressure by the continents' creditors – then presented a considerable increase in political risk for those in power. This, in turn, increased the temptation for those in power to engage in predation, the temptation being all the bigger because the economies of Africa are, more than others, based on the production of precious commodities which lend themselves more easily to private capture than other forms of public revenue. At the same time, underneath the surface of national development, numerous conflicts had been simmering. These had to do with the expansionary (territorial) nature of rural Africa's political economy. When states began to fail, these local conflicts acquired a national significance, causing a rapid spread of insecurity at the local level. There was again a negative feedback mechanism here: the decline in public revenues made it more difficult to manage regional tensions. In this situation, argues Bates, citizens only had the choice between accepting poverty which gave them relative protection from predation or taking up arms to defend their wealth.

There is no doubt that this story, told by Bates over a concise 140 pages, has considerable elegance to it, evolving around a limited set of actors all driven by the same single motive: the quest for material benefits. "Africans, like the rest of us, want to improve their income" (p. 91). The story is also appealing because it presents a clear villain in the shape of African elites. There are also victims – ordinary citizens – with whom the reader can easily sympathise. Whether there are any heroes is less clear but there are at least well-meaning outsiders: international development organisations, most of all the World Bank, who, mysteriously, are the only ones who are not driven by selfish motives of enrichment but have the prosperity of African populations at heart (p. 109, 115).

But what if the story's elegance results from what it omits? Bates' narrative begins in 1960. So what about colonialism? This is a strange omission for a book that takes its title from a novel which had presented the coming of Western colonialism as the moment when "things fell apart". What about colonialism's legacies: an oppressive state, focused on economic exploitation

and the violent management of political order, a disastrous education policy, hasty withdrawal, and ill-prepared elites who, in some countries, were handed the responsibility to rule their huge and underdeveloped countries quite literally overnight? What about Western states that until the early 1990s never cared much about good governance as long as their African client states remained in the right (political) camp? And what about bilateral and multinational agencies that have been an intrinsic part of Africa's political economy, right from independence and not just from the late 1980s: all those policy choices that had such disastrous consequences, as Bates rightly points out, were in each and every case based on the advice of foreign experts. No continent, in fact, has been the recipient of such a massive amount of good advice as Africa in the last half century, with the proposed paradigms changing with increasing speed.

And even given that the story may work well for some countries, for example Congo/Zaire, can it explain why the alleged general forces at work led to quite different outcomes across the continent? In fact, Bates' continental master narrative is made up of selected bits and pieces of country-specific stories which the author lets surface and disappear again in his exposition whenever it seems convenient. For example, while at the beginning of the story, the brunt of the argument is carried by countries like Zambia (for the 1960s) and Benin (up to about 1990), these countries drop from view almost completely after this point and are replaced by Sierra Leone, Rwanda and other countries which up until then had almost not figured in the book. So should we deduce that what can be observed in Zambia in the 1960s and Benin in the 1980s (incidentally on the basis of very outdated literature, and exclusively in English) explains what happened in Sierra Leone, Rwanda and Burundi in the 1990s? To rephrase the question, did all states in Africa actually "fail" (or respectively "collapse", p. 138) when, according to Bates' own figures, there was civil war in less than 20 percent of them (p. 4)? Are there possibly different forms and degrees of state "failure"? And if we accept that the existence of natural resources raised the level of temptation for predation (p. 121), does that explain the genocide in Rwanda? And are there possibly not only trajectories of decline but of resurgence, as in Sierra Leone and Uganda after 2000 when Bates' story ends, quite inexplicably for a book published in 2008? Another question left unanswered is: who exactly are these predatory elites (variously named "rulers", "incumbents" "politicians", "ruling elites", "those in power", etc.)? Sometimes the author seems to imply that he speaks of a very small circle around the presidents, sometimes his definition seems wider, but in any case, the terms themselves are left undefined.

Bates' book rightly reminds us that political order is problematic. It is dependent on highly contingent historical forces, with their path dependencies and a myriad of positive and negative feedback loops. The book also contains a strong argument for the central role of the state for economic development. At the same time, ethnicity and the resource curse, identified by many as the chief villains, are shown to be not simply objective forces causing political disorder and poverty; rather, they are politically mediated. However, the emerging portrait is far too broad-brushed, with all the rich variety of Africa, as present in any other continent, being leveled out. This raises questions of representation. Perhaps then, the real message contained in the book's title is that Bates did in fact want to write another fictional version of "Africa".

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