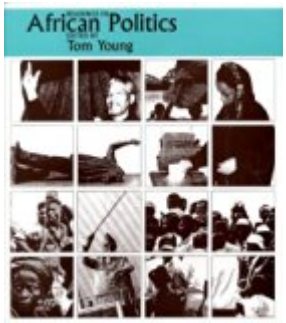
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tom Young, ed.. *Readings in African Politics.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. 254 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-21646-5.



Reviewed by Movindri Reddy

Published on H-SAfrica (April, 2006)

One of the major hurdles in teaching a class on African Politics is the difficulty of compiling a reading list that encapsulates the breadth and depth of the region. Given the diversity that defines the subject and the multiplicities of theories that prevail at any one time, the task of capturing this dynamic and historically distinctive arena can be daunting. *Readings in African Politics*, edited by Tom Young, is a compilation of articles geared towards filling that gap. Young frames this volume by outlining the ways in which contemporary theorists have challenged more solidified paradigms of modernization, the centrality of the state, Dependency Theory, and nationalism--perspectives that ensured the prominence of History and Political Science in African Studies. He says that "new" theories argue the need for genuine civil society and real democratization as ways to increase popular participation and to rekindle nation-state building strategies. However, these theorists (part of a "liberal project") have not completely done away with the "tradition versus modern dichotomy"; instead, they replace it with more nuanced themes that carry similar overtones. One of the strong features of African society, Young reminds us, is that Africans are not abstract agents but are actively engaged and have resilient indigenous structures that provide a degree of stability across multiple changes. While Young's introduction is an interesting and entertaining piece, it leaves many questions unanswered. We are not sure at the beginning, and certainly not at the end, why these particular articles were chosen. Are they part of the liberal project, do they include new African voices, do they present a novel way of looking at Africa, will students learn about general theories or specific case studies? Or are we going to gain a sense of how different disciplines treat the study of Africa? Another disconcerting detail is that the articles span a large time range, from 1966 to 1998, so, while there is no real chronological significance, we are never quite sure why these particular articles are significant under the various chapter headings. To its credit the book includes many informative and theoretically innovative articles.

In the first section, "Appraising the Modern African State," we are introduced to often-cited Africanists like Zolberg, Bates, Hyden, Jackson,

Rosberg, Bayart, Mamdani, Fatton Jr., and, Chabal and Daloz. This section is dominated by Political Science and History and moves from early post-colonial articles to contemporary analyses. There are too many articles espousing the view that state and civil society are treated as binary, zero sum entities, and that inept or ambitious leaders and underdeveloped states create the infrastructure for corruption, nepotism, and instability. Hyden's "Conditions of Governance" very nicely encapsulates these themes, highlighting the notion that African leaders have not developed a hegemonic bourgeois culture, and in this absence an "economy of affection" has come to dominate African states (p. 23). Mamdani refocuses attention to colonialism and isolates the implications direct and indirect rule had for postcolonial states, while Chabal and Daloz reiterate the idea that institutionalized disorder actually works in Africa, and democratic values espoused by the West might not be the solution. None of these authors really deconstruct the state, although Bayart comes the closest in seeing the post-colonial state as created by Europeans but appropriated by indigenous actors to suit their interests and own cultural representations. What is needed in this section are articles written from the perspective of Africans, more emphasis on transnational issues that cross borders and boundaries, and challenges to definitions of states, and state/civil society dichotomies.

In the second section entitled "Dimensions of Conflict," the reader is introduced to numerous case studies, each illustrating the complex historical and contemporary configurations of conflict. The conflicts are chosen from Chad, Mozambique, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Congo-Brazzaville. While they are all interesting articles, this section requires the student to be familiar with these particular case studies. It would have been preferable to have one or two cases with multiple interpretations of the same conflict or different dimensions of it. Instead the articles are choppy and they seem to have been chosen randomly or else the logic behind their selection is not immediately apparent, and many of them are so dense that it is difficult to decipher what the thesis is. Perhaps the rationale for choosing these articles is because they highlight the various aspects of conflict including ethnicity, religion, spiritual beliefs, militias, and ways in which indigenous social structures are affected adversely by new social and economic forces. Highlighting the latter theme, the article by Abbink on the constructive use of violence by the Suri of Southern Ethiopia and the changes this is undergoing, is probably the most fascinating in this section. The article by Bazenguissa-Ganga, on the violence in Congo-Brazaville during the elections of 1997, tells us the most about democratic transitions. His argument, largely hidden in the details, seems to highlight the notion that democratic transitions require political and social institutional changes. Tensions during this period can be exacerbated by demands made by the International Monetary Fund and other international organizations, increasing discontent that can take the form of ethnic, regional and generational cleavages. The increasing relevance of cross-border conflicts, the movement of refugees, and the expansion of conflicts across borders, are some of the themes missing in this section.

The third section on "The Local and the Traditional" is likewise interesting, but also very varied and all over the map. The articles include land disputes between the Nso in Western Cameroon, the primacy of eating practices in the sociopolitical order of the Sadama in Southwest Ethiopia, the politics of the Biriwa in Sierra Leone, and the rights among the Karabora and Fulbe in Burkina Faso. All the articles focus on local structures and they all emphasize the local over national statewide imperatives. What is missing is a coherent theoretical overview that outlines the various implications that local politics have on notions of statehood in Africa. How do these local institutions and the resiliency of indigenous structures

challenge perspectives on states' power, nationalism and state sovereignty.

In the section on the "Politics of New Social Forces" we are introduced to prominent constituents that have begun to emerge in post-colonial Africa. Diouf focuses on the youth in Senegalese cities, Kassimir on the organizational capacity of the Catholic Church in Uganda, Tripp writes about the urban informal economy in Tanzania, and House-Midamba highlights the role of Kenyan women in the democratization movement. This section seems to include the role of the youth, women, religious institutions, and informal economic institutions. There is so much that can count as "New Social Forces" that it must have been difficult to make these selections. Here too, cross-state and inter-regional themes, such as religious movements, militias, child soldiers and privately sponsored violence, are not included.

The final section of the book, entitled "Political Change," is really about changes in sub-Saharan Africa with articles on Mozambique, South Africa, Botswana and Zambia, Tanzania, and Uganda. A refreshing aspect of this section is that the main themes are not about conflict or violence, as is often the case, but on changes that are both constructive and challenging. The last section also seems to have the most visibly thematically coherent approach. In postwar Mozambique, Alexander shifts the discourse from the Marxist emphasis on states and class to the local perceptions of power and authority. Moore, in analyzing post-socialist liberalization in Tanzania, questions the viability of using western definitions of modernity to understand the specificities of the local Tanzanian experience. The lens shifts yet again in van Binsbergen's study of democratization in Zambia and Botswana, where the analysis is conducted from the "political culture at the grassroots" (p. 202). Karlstrom adds to the discourses on democracy using the case of Buganda, and highlights the dialectical relationships between democratization and local social and political historical practices. Using Soweto as the focal point to study witchcraft, Ashforth analyzes the challenges made by these practices to democratic institutions in South Africa. All these articles analyze ways in which people make sense of democracy and draw attention to the importance of recognizing the impact of state-driven changes at the local level.

In conclusion, this is a good resource for students and academics. While it tries to cover some of the key thematic approaches in the region, it also has a few gaps. North Africa is thinly covered, which, given the significance of this region in international politics in recent years, it is unfortunate. The relevance of transnational movements is also underplayed. Religious movements like the Muslim Brotherhood are increasingly prominent and are examples of some of the powerful transnational forces at play in Africa. Lastly, while the book goes a long way to add new scholars, to include new discourses, and to include African voices, like other endeavors in this genre, it does not go far enough.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica

Citation: Movindri Reddy. Review of Young, Tom, ed. ***Readings in African Politics.*** H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11611