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Crawford Young. *The Postcolonial State in Africa: Fifty Years of Independence, 1960-2010.* Africa and the Diaspora Series. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. xviii + 468 pp. $31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-29144-0.

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach

Crawford Young's latest book, *The Postcolonial State in Africa*, is an intricately detailed and lucidly written overview of postcolonial African politics. With a scholarly career that has spanned the duration of Africa's postcolonial history, and produced some of the most critical interventions in the study of African politics, Young is particularly well-positioned to provide the summary statement of what has become a large and dynamic field. The deep personal perspective the author brings to bear on the topic at hand–as both a witness to Africa's major political transformations and a key figure in rendering these transformations legible–serves as one of the book's greatest assets.

Young's contribution is a fine complement to Goran Hyden's *African Politics in Comparative Perspective* (2006), which serves as another well-conceived summation of Africa's postcolonial condition. The comparative advantage of Young's work is its melding of abstract theoretical concepts, relating to the African state and its modes of rule, with a detailed historical narrative that provides texture to the continent's multiple political transformations. In this sense, *The Postcolonial State in Africa* truly shines, introducing readers to the conceptual tools commonly applied to analyses of African politics, while not neglecting to describe in detail the people, places, and events that have been central elements of Africa's postcolonial history.

Those familiar with Young's earlier work, particularly *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (1994) but also multiple treatises on the Congo, will find echoes of past insights littered throughout his most recent book. Chapter 2 of *The Postcolonial State in Africa* is the volume's theoretical core, addressing widely employed concepts, such as "neo-patrimonialism" and the "developmental state." These concepts and others, to greater or lesser degrees, feature in Young's interpretation of major African political trends in the chapters that follow. Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 describe Africa's postcolonial "itineraries," providing the detailed historical narrative of the postcolonial period that is the book's central focus. In an effort to structure this narrative, Young identifies six distinct phases in African political history, which in turn are divided into three alternating cycles of Afro-optimism and Afro-pessimism.

Young's periodization in these chapters will resonate with readers who possess even passing familiarity with Africa's postcolonial history. The first phase in the postcolonial story was the moment immediately following the wave of African decolonization, when the glow of successful political struggle and the continent's vast but unharnessed economic potential created high expectations of prosperity and social harmony. Relative to their Asian peers, most African states seemed primed for a takeoff. Yet as Young notes, "the moment of enthusiasm that accompanied the rituals of independence faded quickly" as a rash of military coups, the growing authoritarianism of revered anticolonial leaders, and the outbreak of a devastating civil war in Nigeria led to widespread pessimism by the late 1960s (p. 122).

Africa's fortunes again seemed to change at the dawn of a new decade. Although the Biafra conflict would exact a terrible human toll, it ran its course by 1970. The end of civil war in Africa's most populous country, coupled with the rapid expansion of the state as a developmental actor–a trend best captured by the increasing number of nationalizations and the dramatic growth in public sector employment–recreated the hope of the heady early days of independence. This emergence of what Young calls the "integral state" was underpinned by the growing intellectual belief that centralization, control, and authority were commodities that would deliver African growth (p. 55). By contrast, political pluralism came to be equated with

disorder, and logically, with economic stagnation.

By the mid-1970s, the "integral state" model proved to be increasingly problematic. African states had become overextended as consumption rose to unsustainable levels. The neo-patrimonial logic governing the behavior of Africa's ruling elites magnified the effects of this overexpansion, as market distortions and corruption became the glue that bound rulers to their network of supporters. As a result, growth rates plummeted, state institutions began to crumble, and political turmoil engulfed the continent. By the 1980s, the African crisis was in full swing, and no combination of externally induced economic reform would be capable of moving the continent out this morass.

The end of the Cold War ushered in the fifth phase in Africa's political development. Super power rivalry, and the quest for third world clients that it engendered, was a key element in sustaining ruling regimes that had systematically failed to deliver. Deprived of great power support, Africa's autocrats became vulnerable to civil society pressures. Popular protest in Algeria and Benin would serve as models of change that diffused to the rest of the continent, as political liberalization became the order of the day.

However, while many African states made real transitions to a more plural political order, democracy had its limits. In some cases, political transition led to widespread violence and sustained state collapse. Many other African states became institutional hybrids, where leaders endorsed the façade of electoral accountability while systematically subverting democratic institutions. The varied paths of African states in this most recent phase, with some pursuing the route of democracy and development while others remained mired in economic and political dysfunction, leads Young to conclude that: "In short, after three decades of largely parallel trajectories, African states began to follow widely divergent itineraries" (p. 195).

To its credit, *The Postcolonial State in Africa* is exhaustive in integrating an enormous literature into a coherent and compelling historical narrative. Still, there are intellectual strands that might have deserved greater emphasis. For instance, Young quite rightly attributes the African crisis of the 1970s and 1980s to the policy failures of African governments. Yet as Jeffrey Herbst's *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority* (2000) and other studies have shown, environmental and demographic factors were a critical part of the cocktail. The same could be said of the vagaries of the global political economy, which such scholars as Giovanni Arrighi have argued served as veritable anchor around the neck of most African economies in this era.[1] While the book's acknowledged focus on the African state no doubt shapes its narrative of the African crisis, underlining the structural constraints that have hampered the performance of African states is an important task. This is particularly true since the response to the African crisis, structural adjustment, tended to assume that the African crisis was the sole product of the pathologies of the African state, a bias that was arguably a major shortcoming of such reforms.

More recent political and economic trends could have also received more sustained treatment, although to be fair, any assessment would likely have been speculative. China's increased political and economic presence, the so-called Global War on Terror, and the HIV/AIDS crisis are forces that have done much to reshape the African state in recent years. The effects of globalization, most notably, the increasing relevance of African diasporas and the diffusion of communications technologies, receive only a brief mention in the book's final pages.

The volume's final chapters reflect on two themes that permeate much of the book's historical narrative. Chapter 7 assesses the history of armed conflict in independent Africa, and describes the rising tide of internal conflict that characterized much of the African continent as the Cold War came to a conclusion. While earlier African civil wars appeared to be "linked to a legible normative objective" (p. 244), the character of conflict seemed to shift in the post-Cold War era, with combatants engaging in widespread predation and the victimization of civilian populations. Young carefully qualifies this line of argument, however, correctly noting that the motives and behavior of contemporary African insurgents have been far from uniform.

Chapter 8 explores the interacting frames of pan-Africanism, territorial nationalism, and ethnicity–what Young terms the "ambiguous triple helix of identity" (p. 291). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this chapter is its investigation of a puzzle most recently addressed by Pierre Engelbert's *Africa: Unity, Sovereignty, Sorrow* (2009): the persistence of African states bequeathed by the colonial apparatus, despite their recurring inability to perform. Young makes the novel argument that territorial nationalism is a powerful emotive force in the African political psyche, and that African states persist because "their populations want them to do so, and they will not bear the few voices proposing their fragmenta-

tion" (p. 305). This point is well taken, particularly in light of the popular claim that the persistence of African states is an artifact of the external sovereignty that the international system affords them. Yet the tone of this section seems to imply a triumph of the national project that some might find premature. Separatism is a powerful force in contemporary Africa, and as recent events in Mali demonstrate, the national question remains unresolved in a great number of African polities.

To be clear, the above commentary in no way diminishes a book that is a fitting tribute to one of the academy's most esteemed Africanists. *The Postcolonial State in Africa* is a work of scope and ambition, written with great clarity and flair. Each chapter is densely packed with historical detail and theoretical insight, as Young synthesizes multiple strands of scholarship into an easily digestible narrative. This book should be required reading for students of African politics, and will serve as a critical roadmap of the field for years to come.

Note

[1]. Giovanni Arrighi, "The African Crisis: World Systemic and Regional Aspects," *New Left Review* 15 (May 2002): 5-36.

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