POLS 4033/POLS 7036: The State in Africa: Democratisation and Crisis

Instructor: Professor Keith Breckenridge (keith.breckenridge@wits.ac.za)

Week 1 Introductions and expectations

This course is designed to provide you with a rich analytical toolbox for understanding states on the African continent. But it is also intended to equip you with ways of approaching and criticizing the dominant forms of theory in the social sciences.

It is important to understand at the outset that this is a reading course. You will be required to complete, carefully and attentively, approximately 150 pages of reading per week. This will take you a minimum of four hours. Failure to prepare for each class by completing the readings will be a signal that you are not interested in earning credit for the course.

Assessment:

The final mark for this course will be composed of:

- a mark for your oral participation in the class (10% of final)
- two 2,000 word essays, the first due on 29 August and the second on October 24 (40% of final). These essays will be submitted on-line using CLE.
- a final exam in the first week of November (50% of final)

Readings you should already be familiar with:


Influential theoretical accounts of the state:


*Further reading on States*


Week 2 The Gatekeeper State and the past of this present

The goals of this seminar are:

(1) to provide the class with a common set of terms and problems that we can use to discuss and debate the characteristics of the state in contemporary Africa.

And (2) to begin to map out some of the primary explanations of the causes of those, apparently, distinctive state characteristics.

It is, as ever, very important to ensure that you leave yourself sufficient time to complete all of the reading which, this week, will be some 190 pages. Typically, this will require at least five hours of focused preparation time. Failure to complete the reading, and to show in discussion that you have done so, will result in your having to complete an additional writing assignment for next week.

Required reading:
Cooper, Frederick. *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. (Please read the entire book, if you are pressed for time you may skip the final chapter).

OR


AND


Optional reading:


Concepts and problems:

- Gatekeeper state
- Burden of development
- Commodity cycle
- Debt crisis
- Structural adjustment
In this seminar we will examine the question of whether there is a common political or cultural form to all the states on the African continent. Does it make sense to use the concept of the African state analytically? This is a debate that can be usefully pursued in both directions – you may argue that there is nothing, except perhaps geography and a shared history of being the targets of racism, that combines African countries and their states; or you may insist on the common political effects of demography, property relations, slavery, and a common political – economy of colonialism on the form of the modern state in Africa. Be sure, however, that you are aware of the details of both positions before you make your own case. The reading for this week (180 pp) should take you between four and five hours.

**Required reading:**


  OR


**Optional reading:**


*Concepts and problems:*

- Race, racism and racial essentialism
- Demography and state formation
- Disease environments
- Resource endowments
- African philosophy
**Week 4 Stateless political traditions**

For the five-hundred years before 1500 the dominant forms of political authority and structures of power on the African continent were, mostly, very different from the Feudal states of Europe, the Ottoman empire, the Mandarin bureaucracies of East Asia, or the Mayan and Incan civilizations of the Americas. On most of the continent political relationships before 1600 were very local, fiercely constrained by animals, the forest and by disease. Jan Vansina has called the structure of allegiances and relationships that emerged in the Central African forest the equatorial political tradition. Understanding what this was, how and where it worked is not an easy task, but it is very important to all of the later theoretical accounts of politics on this continent.

**Required reading:**


**Optional reading:**


**Concepts and problems:**

- Homesteads
- Brotherhoods
- Ritual politics
- Infrastructure
- Slave trade
Week 5 States, Empires and Capitalism

Practices and trajectories of state-building were altered and accelerated very dramatically by the establishment of the Atlantic slave trade at the end of the 15th century. Many difficult questions remain unresolved today about the consequences of these processes and this time on the work of politics and the structures of society and the state in the societies most powerfully affected by the slave trade.

Required reading:

Optional reading:


**Concepts and problems:**

- World systems
- Local agency
- African and Atlantic Slavery
- Property and accumulation
- Markets and value systems
**Week 6 Conquest and the Colonial State**

The colonial state has an intriguingly contradictory nature in our contemporary scholarship. It was, on the one hand, a brutal and disruptive force, spreading violence and shattering the ideological and social coherence of the polities across the continent. On the other hand it was ridiculously poor and weak, incapable of much more than the most basic forms of tax collection. In this seminar will try to decide whether one of these accounts of the colonial state is correct, or whether they should combined. We will also consider closely the long-term effects of the structures and functions of colonial government.

**Required reading:**

**Optional reading:**

**Concepts and problems:**
- Bula Mutari
- Indirect rule
- Violence
- Consciousness
- Tribalism
One of the distinctive features of both the colonial and the post-colonial states in Africa has been the reliance on unelected customary authorities for the many tasks of local government, especially (but not exclusively) in the countryside. The effects of this arrangement, which Mamdani has called decentralised despotism, have been diverse and powerful. In this week we examine indirect rule and its consequences for the vast majority of Africans who still live and work on the land.

Required reading:

Optional reading:

**Concepts and problems:**

- Hegemony
- Despotism
- Uncertainty
- Property rights
- Kinship
Week 8 Decolonisation and the Burden of Development

One of the most important – and surprising – results of recent research into the crisis of the postcolonial state has been the stress which scholars place on the unmanageable burden of the development projects which these states inherited in the 1960s. The crises of development took place in stages – some before decolonisation and others a generation later, but they resulted, by the early 1980s, in extremely weak states across the continent. In this week’s seminar we will explore the developmental burden and the shattering of the state through a close study of the society of Zaire / Congo – the most problematic but also, arguably, strategically the most important state on the African continent.

Required reading:

Optional reading:

Concepts and problems:
- Expert-led government
- Cold-War
- Developmentalism
- Debt-trap
- Patrimonialism
- Infrastructural politics
- Mining corporations
Week 9 Science, technology and the modernising State

Science and technology have been instruments of state-building in many contexts, but their place on the African continent is a bit mysterious. Colonial conquest was famously aided by strategic technologies like the telegraph and quinine, and it was often justified by the claim that Africans lacked science and key productive technologies. But what was the place of science and technology in the postcolonial state? Was there too much of one or the other, or both, or too little, or was the problem one of the distribution of power and agency?

Required reading:


Optional reading:


**Concepts and problems:**

- Vernacular / global science
- Networks and infrastructure
- Technology
- Science
- Technopolitics
Week 10 Women, gender and the problems of tradition

Required reading:

Optional reading:

Concepts and problems:
- Tradition
- Masculinity
- Sexuality
- Reproduction
- Violence
Week 11 The Rhizome State, Patrimonialism and Bureaucratic Rationality

Required reading:

Optional reading:
**Week 12 The resource curse, dependency, extraversion and state power: the Angolan exception**

**Required Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**
**Week 13 Nongovernmentality and humanitarianism : government without states**

Required reading:


Optional reading:


**Week 14 When states are not “the State”: Absent states and state effects**

*Required reading*


*Concepts and problems:*

- State ideas and state effects
- Governmentality and non-governmentality
- State “failure” and “success”