Fragile states and neoliberalism in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Global Forces and State Restructuring. Dynamics of state formation and collapse
by Martin Doornbos, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Neoliberalism, Civil Society and Security in Africa
by Padraig Carmody, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

At least 50 percent of African countries feature in the numerous studies and indexes of so-called fragile or failed states. Such states were engendered during the Cold War, but were shaped by the classical questions of international relations – those of power, order and security - before they became part of the international system.

While African states were thought to constitute the backwater of international politics up until the 1990s, they have increasingly attracted attention as objects of study since the end of the cold war. This can be explained in terms of the breakdown of a political context in which states were conceived as independent entities and a concomitant upsurge of interest in their internal political realities - now considered an important factor in international relations. Moreover, if donor communities' cooperation policies are to be effective, then a better understanding of the characteristics of the countries on which they hope to make an impact is required.

The renewed interest in Africa from the 1990s onwards expressed itself in new terminology, such as the syntagm *failed states.* From the 11th September 2001 in particular, states which were given this label quickly moved up the political agenda, as concern grew that not only were they incapable of following the development path laid out by the neoliberal political agenda but - according to the most pessimistic voices - they might even come to destabilise the international system. The promotion of the concept of *good governance* aimed to remedy that trend.

African states, however, have usually been studied as incomplete political spaces which fail to conform to the characteristics of the modern state. This is why those amongst them that are considered failed states are seen as a threat to the normal functioning of the international system. Yet an understanding of the political phenomena represented by African states is indeed founded on the paradigm of the modern state - the international system's essential referent and in comparison to which they can be seen as deviant. As a result, international policies designed specifically for *failed* states attempt to fit African states into the parameters of the modern state, thus re-building them in their image.

This reasoning is based to a great extent on the traditional view of Sub-Saharan Africa - as a continent marginalised by international politics. Yet this way of thinking has been questioned by Timothy Shaw,[1] who as editor of the International Political Economy series published by Palgrave, continues to offer an alternative reading to that of Africa as marginalised in the age of globalization. Two of these titles - *Global Forces and State Restructuring: Dynamics of State Formation and Collapse* by Martin Doornbos, and *Neoliberalism, Civil Society and Security in Africa* by Padraig Carmody - tackle the dynamics of the contemporary international system as it functions in the African context, including the defence of its order and security.

The first of the two texts provides an analysis of the current processes of state collapse, restructuring and formation. The second, which refers to a vast number of studies by other authors, refers to the way in which the neoliberal project has reformulated and reinvented itself in order to endure. Are the *fragile* or *failed* states mere empty spaces? Are the policies which are being drawn up the right ones to safeguard the international system?

Putting to one side the importance of the end of the cold war to collapsed states, Doornbos believes that that process of collapse should not be dissociated from that of state formation. Both are part of political reorganisation and they also partake of wider processes such as globalization, as well as being shaped by strong ideologies such as neoliberalism. Globalization, defined by Doornbos as the economic, political and cultural power that constrains and conditions the state system, thus encourages both the formation of states and their collapse, through, for example, the institutionalisation of structures at a global level which impinge on powers that previously belonged to the nation state. This amounts to less political autonomy and a growing demand for conformity - factors which not all states respond to in the same way.

After decolonisation, African states failed to conform to the model of modernity, yet the differences produced thereby have been blurred by the various concepts of failed, collapsed or weak states. Attempts have been made by the international community to guide the internal organisation and administrative mechanisms of these regions by promoting certain standards, around which they might be re-structured. There is a stubborn insistence on "the adoption of standards of behaviour derived from the West in several political-cultural contexts which are not Western".[2] An idea of the state as the guarantor of the rule of law, public order and development is consequently taken for granted, whilst in fact such a relation is far from being automatic – as collapsed states show only too well.

The typical crisis of the failed state constitutes a threat for the international system because of the social conditions which characterise it and the type of conflicts which it generates, but also because they question the viability of an actor key to international relations: the state itself. According to Doornbos, the international system "depends on the premise of the normality of states".[3] However, a lack of understanding of how collapsed states actually work causes a situation in which not only are there no guarantees that international policies will achieve their objective, but that they might even have the opposite effect to that desired.

The concept of *good governance* is one of the fundamental elements of prevailing international standards and a tool which can be used to measure the quality of sovereignty of many African states. Yet the concept also acts in defence of a certain political formula, one that perpetuates the image of these societies as passive victims rather than political actors. But for Doornbos, the concept of good governance as understood by academics – who attempt to contextualize the relations of power and authority between state and society in order to acquire a better

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[1] In 2001, Shaw edited - along with Kevin Dunn - *Africa's Challenge to International Relations Theory* (New York: Palgrave), a book critical of the platitudes conventionally used to describe the continent. In the introduction, Kevin Dunn points out that Africa has been absent in International Relations theory, a marginalisation which has made the continent prey to power relations, in part due to an incomprehension of theoretical politics in African states, p. 2.

[2] Doornbos, p. 81.

[3] Doornbos, p. 112.

understanding of them - is out of step with current policies, which place a great emphasis on the state as a group of institutions and see the way in which they are administered as the key to creating an impact on the territories in which they are implemented.

In this way, the international community can be said to limit the exercise of sovereignty in failed states – a sovereignty that may provide a space in which alternative political organizations can emerge and which might even allow interlocutors to be discovered within the society itself, rather than within the state structures alone. As the author himself affirms, collapse can lead to new, formative political processes.[4] However, the problem - as the last seventeen years of Somalia's history shows – is, once again, that the international system depends for its survival on the existence of states which fit into the model of the modern nation state.

Since the disintegration of the Somali state in 1991, due to a struggle for control over the political direction of the country, the state has ceased to exist as a bureaucratic structure. Yet it continues to exist as a legal structure in the eyes of the international community (according to the United Nations, for example). Whilst initial attempts at reconciliation and state restoration were made, political entities such as Somaliland began to appear. The latter has demanded recognition of its independent status from the international community, by virtue of its condition as a former British colony. Similarly, Somali Puntland - the example used by Doornbos - is another case where new forms of state administration take shape within a 'collapsed state' and where local processes restore political authority.

It seems that studies of Somalia and other African states have not paid enough attention to the rôle of non-state actors - whether local or international - in the consolidation or weakening of the state and in the promotion of development. The international response to these states – which are perceived as anomalous spaces - has neglected the possibility that they may be political spaces, in the process of re-organising themselves. Fragile states, considered as blank spaces, have been subject to a number of interventions that were motivated by a kind of political *horror vacui* - interventions which were also designed according to "institutional standards and mechanisms characteristic of Western neo-liberal systems"[5] and which fail to take into account each country's specific characteristics and demands. In the final analysis, this demonstrates that the international system has little or no idea of how to deal with these spaces, as was made clear in 1993 - with the failure of operation Restore Hope in Somalia.

State collapse involves a number of very complex processes, with case by case variations that defy an automatic assimilation to the idea of a failed society. Such realities question the myth of state and sovereignty, and can be understood as the upshot of a need for change and a search for an appropriate political system which will reflect the reality of a particular society. The processes of collapse and formation in fact take place at the same time, and both are characterised by a redefinition of identity, power relations, administrative structures and state-society relations.[6] Up until the present, attention has focused on the state and its institutions, rather than on the relationship between state and society, or on movements for social survival. This reveals a lack of knowledge of the political and social realities of African states.

In contrast to the idea of an ungoverned blank space, Doornbos defends the procedure of situating the formation and collapse of states within a wider historical context. He is, moreover, highly sceptical about the suitability of pre-existing formulas, which have failed in the past. He argues for allowing space and providing support, from academic and political spheres, for the actors who are directly involved in inventing their own solutions.

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[4] Doornbos, p. 176.

[5] Doornbos, p. 77.

[6] Raeymaekers, Timothy, "Collapse or order? Questioning the collapse of the state in Africa" in *Revista Académica de Relaciones Internacionales*, nº 8, March, 200, p. 11. The author tackles these questions and argues that Somalia "has seen the emergence of a mosaic of local political formations which are developed from new agreements between local "strong men", family elders and the clans and the local politicians (of the militias) which provide Somalis with various levels of "governance", if not government." p.8.

For the time being, then, international actors continue to search for remedies to resolve the phenomenon of collapsed states almost in the same way as a doctor looks for a cure to a disease, thereby reducing the likelihood that collapsed states and societies can find their own solutions. Doornbos maintains that donors have to stop thinking of their job as a transfer of policies, in order to enable them to carry out the real task of supporting programmes designed within the societies affected directly by state collapse. As long as is there is no change in that perspective, international policy is destined to expend its efforts in trying to preserve a system without realising that it may itself be one of the causes of collapse.

In fact, terms such as "good governance" or "civil society" - *buzzwords* according to Doornbos,[7] *watchwords* for Carmody[8] - have enabled development cooperation to regenerate itself; yet this has taken place without a revision of the first principles of the manifestly failed policies of the past – policies, indeed, which shaped the evolution of African states, such as the structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s. In other words, they have perpetuated an endogenous understanding of poverty or conflict, and omitted variables of an international nature, such as the consolidation of certain elites in the government due to their ties with the international community, or the opaque participation of multinationals in the running of the economy. To the extent that they avoid examining factors of a structural nature, these policy tools support the international *status quo.*

Indeed, neoliberalism - understood as a synthesis between a free-market economy and democratic liberal theory - has not only made the continent's economic marginalisation more acute, but also perpetuated policies of clientelism.[9] Yet in spite of the political and economic crises which it has generated, the ideology has reproduced itself through successive reforms, thereby avoiding a re-examination of contradictions between the aim of poverty reduction and government policies. Carmody broaches this question in order to explain the neoliberal agenda in Africa.

From the 1990s onwards, the collapse of the USSR was interpreted as a victory for the USA, thus legitimising policies which have shaped the majority of international interventions in fragile states. The main objective of those policies is to bring about the reconstruction of states and they are founded on the notion that the society in question is a passive agent which has to be stirred into life from afar.

Carmody studies in particular the effects of neoliberalism on economic development and the promotion of domestic security. He does so in reference to three cases, each of which deals with a different issue. First of all he looks at Ethiopia, where poverty-reduction policies driven by international bodies have not led to substantial economic, social or political change, or given rise to a dialogue between state and society. Secondly, he considers Zimbabwe, where change brought about by neoliberal pressure on the Mugabe regime has increased precariousness amongst the population. The third example is that of South Africa, where the evolution of the NEPAD has led to greater economic and social vulnerability in the country at large.

Looking at these three cases, it's hard to argue that neoliberal policies have resulted in greater social, political or economic well-being in African states. But neoliberal development policies also aim at promoting the participation of society, with the much heralded *Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers* (PRSP) being currently in vogue. These documents seek to rehabilitate the state

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[7] Doornbos, pp. 74. *Buzzwords* conceal the failure of previous political directions and offer the chance to merely renew them; cf. Darbon, Dominique, "¿Reformar o rehacer las administraciones proyectadas de las Áfricas? Entre rutina antipolítica e ingeniería política contextual" in *Revista Académica de Relaciones Internacionales,* nº 5, November, 2006, p. 9.
[8] Carmody, pp. 12.
[9] Carmody, pp. 2.

whilst encouraging society to participate in the process. For that reason, they are centered on civil and social rights (although they do not allude to the construction of a welfare state).[10]

The problem thus arises in the contradictions which these kinds of policies generate; pursuing the aim of domestic security in order to establish the internal and international stability necessary for market prosperity, they fail to question the development model itself, and neglect to promote the formation of strong social movements which might call it into question. Similarly, the growing disparity between the declared policy objectives – the well-being of all – and their real consequences - the concentration of power in a few hands and class inequality - is explained away through a reference to the role which civil society is expected to play as a counterweight to the state, though a truly critical line of questioning is never voiced, thereby leaving the overall balance of power uncontested.[11]

Going back to Carmody's example - the contradictions of neoliberalism are reflected in the way in which the PRSP in Ethiopia has been designed. The relationship between the World Bank and the Ethiopian government of Meles Zenawi appears to be stranded somewhere between the need to support a society with one of the world's worst human development indexes, and the geo-strategic imperative of maintaining support for a government which does not subscribe to even the most basic principles of neoliberal doctrine. Since 1991, the Ethiopian government, which is run by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, has been able to defend the rhetorical line which donors want to hear whilst preserving its Marxist-Leninist ideology.[12] By doing so, it has managed to continue securing resources from outside the country, whilst controlling the movements of members of the opposition and refusing to acknowledge private landed property.

Concern at the advance of terrorism in the Horn of Africa has led to an interest in keeping up good relations with Ethiopia, which is a key country in the region. The USA and the UK have both been loath to distance themselves from an ally in the war on terror,[13] thereby legitimising the government. It is also true that it would be difficult to cut off aid to a state, and consequently a society, which is regularly exposed to famine. On paper, the PRSP is designed in a way that is geared towards achieving the consolidation of the state by fomenting the participation of society, an objective that has not been met.

Based on his research on Ethiopia, Carmody explains how in practice there was little social participation in the drafting of the Ethiopian document. The explanation of the difficulties in creating adequate participation channels can be explained by a number of factors. In the case of Ethiopia, the coercive nature of the state has, in the past, fundamentally shaped the society. Since 1960, the state has developed so-called participative projects of collective management, yet this has left the peasantry effectively under its control, and thus participation initiatives in general are met with distrust in Ethiopian society.[14]

The notion of participation indeed varies according to the way it is interpreted by actors such as development agencies - both local and international -, the Ethiopian state and its civil servants, and the society where it takes place, not to mention the additional variant of the relative power of such elements. Authors critical of this kind of ambiguous policy have pointed to the

[10] Carmody, pp. 113. With respect to security policy, Mark Duffield points out that "it is important to note that the idea that collective social welfare is the state's responsibility, such as it is understood in the European idea of the welfare state, is conspicuous by its absence in the political discourse" and that the direction being taken is one that moves towards a "welfare model essentially reliant on aid and privatized"; cf. "Los estados frágiles y el retorno de la administración nativa, en *Revista Académica de Relaciones Internacionales*, nº 8, March, 2008, pp. 6 y 12.

[11] Carmody, pp. 45 & 73

[12] Vestal, Theodore M., *Ethiopia. A Post-Cold War African State*, Praeger, Westport Connecticut, 1999, chapter 7.

[13] Leboeuf, Aline et Antil, Alain, "États fragiles et terrorisme, le lien ambigu" en Châtaigner, Jean-Marc et Magro, Hervé (dirs.), *États et sociétes fragiles. Entre conflits, reconstruction et développement*, Karthala, Paris, 2007, pp. 210

[14] Harrison, Elizabeth "The problem with the locals": Partnership and participation in Ethiopia», en *Development and Change,* 2002, vol. 33, nº 4, pp. 587-610.

PRSP as a mechanism which strengthens the World Bank above all, making participation "a technology at the service of vigilance and the normalization of civil society and the state, whilst playing an insignificant part in the day to day lives of ordinary people".[15] If, as Braudel has indicated, explaining the present is still the aim, a working knowledge of the political and social context where development interventions are to take place is required if improvements are to be brought about.[16]

Such practices make of neoliberalism a doctrine which ultimately promotes inequality, restricting the evolution of states in the international system and distorting many of the principles it aims to foster. One of the messages transmitted by the authors analysed here is that states and societies need to find the space to reformulate their own kind of political organisation, and they consequently require international policies that try to go beyond standard notions of the state. Overcoming the contradictions of neoliberalism in part requires abandoning a teleological and Manichean view of history, and returning to a long term perspective.

Current international policy is based on a zeal for prediction and a race into the future, which coincides with a divorce from history (which, by definition, lacks a prophetic quality);[17] hence the need to study the current configuration of states and, alongside this, to find new subject matter - such as the collapse of states or new international actors. Thus classical concepts such as power, sovereignty or security might be seen from other perspectives - perspectives that could, for example, explain the relationship between state and society, at both the national and international levels.

One of the pitfalls of policies designed for fragile states is the gap that separates them from certain academic explanations that are critical of the functioning of international society. For the latter provide conceptual instruments with which to better understand the social realities of failed states. Even today, the discipline of international relations tends to analyse the world in line with the most powerful states, mainly because the subject originated within them, and with it they have driven forward the development of the international system itself.[18]

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[15] Carmody, p. 118; other authors have explained how liberalism will accept despotic regimes if they can deliver development. For example, Mark Duffield in *op.cit.*

[16] Braudel, Fernand, *Grammaire des civilisations,* Flammarion, París, 1993, pp. 25.

[17] Braudel, Fernand, *Écrits sur l'histoire*, Flammarion, París, 1969, pp. 20.

[18] Clapham, Christopher, *Africa and the International System. The politics of State Survival,* Cambridge University Press., Cambridge, 1999, pp. 4.

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