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Madlib #32: The (*Blank*) African State: Rethinking the Sovereign State in International Relations Theory*

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The rhetoric of state failure

When I was growing up, we had books called 'Madlibs' in which each page had a short narrative with numerous words missing and replaced with blanks. Under the blanks, grammatical labels signaled the type of word missing – i.e. verb, noun, adjective, or adverb. The idea behind the game was that one person would come up with random nouns, verbs and so forth which would be put into the text. Once completed, the passage would then be read aloud for the uproarious amusement of our young minds.

It strikes me that recent scholarship on the African state has become like a Madlib. We begin with the passage 'the — African state' and then proceed to insert an adjective that fits our philosophical disposition – or tickles our academic funny bone. Just a few of the labels attached to the African state over the past decade or so include 'failed' (Leys 1976), 'lame' (Sandbrook 1985), 'fictive' (Callaghy 1987), 'weak' (Rothchild 1987), 'collapsing' (Diamond 1987), 'quasi' (Migdal 1988), 'invented' and 'imposed' (Jackson 1990), 'shadow' (O'Brien 1991), 'overdeveloped' and 'centralized' (Davidson 1992), 'swollen' (Zartman 1995), 'soft' (Herbst 1996), 'extractive' and 'parasitic' (Clark 1998a), 'premodern' (Buzan 1998) and 'post-state' (Boone 1998). Obviously Africanists have spilled great amounts of ink thinking about the state of the state (see Doornbos 1990).

The Africanist analysis of the state is in direct contrast to mainstream international relations (IR) theory where the state continues to be treated as the unproblematic starting point of analysis. To paraphrase R.B.J.

Walker, the absence of any serious theorizing of the state is an Achilles' heel of IR theory (Walker 1993: 48, 117). Interrogation of this basic unit of analysis is long overdue. While important theoretical work has been conducted from the discipline's margins (particularly by feminists and post-structuralists), IR could learn much about the state from the fruitful Africanist literature.¹

However, the Africanist literature on the state is not without its own serious drawbacks. While it is accepted that the state is a Western concept, often implicit in these Madlibs is the position that the state is *insert the adjective of your choice* because the African environs is inhospitable to its growth. That is to say, the first (descriptive) adjective is employed *because* of the second adjective: 'African.' Meanwhile, the noun 'state' remains unproblematic. The literature on state failure in Africa tends to reflect the position that somehow (the reasons are frequently different) the imported Western state has been unable to take root and flourish in the African soil, *because of deficiencies in the soil itself*. Instead of leading us to rethink the basic concepts of IR theory, the Madlibs of state failure introduce evolutionary analogies and classifications. In effect, these approaches rely the Western concept while delegitimizing non-Western politics. This is done by treating African states as failed (read: illegitimate) attempts at being Western and, most importantly, modern. African politics are portrayed as backward or primordial. For example, Barry Buzan has argued that Third World states need to be considered a separate *class* of state. He observes that they have little connection to the established Western concept (Buzan 1991; also Buzan 1998). To distinguish between states, he offers three categories: modern, postmodern, and premodern states (Buzan 1998). The African state is, of course, considered a *premodern* state.

The use of classifications such as these is troublesome for at least two reasons. First, such classifications ignore the fact that *no* state fits neatly into one category. All states have traits of what Buzan considers modernity, postmodernity, and premodernity. It is easy to recognize elements of a 'postmodern' state in South Africa. Likewise, there are elements of supposed 'premodern' statehood in the West. Take for example the scandals of patronalism and corruption in Belgium, to say nothing of the EU 'super-state.'

Second, and more dangerous, is the fact that classifications often employ evolutionary language that perpetuate the view that Africa is backward and inhospitable to 'modernity' and 'civilization.' While Buzan's use of the term 'premodern' may be regrettable, it aptly reflects the general trend in the state failure literature. African states seemingly

fail to measure up to the West in this most basic feature of civilization: arranging their politics in the (superior) form of nation-states. This literature tends to deny and delegitimize the various forms of socio-political organizations that Africans do employ. The simple fact that they have failed to construct Western-styled states is often seen as an example of Africa's failure to modernize/civilize.

While many authors would probably be uncomfortable with the view that Africans are politically inferior, their use of such loaded rhetoric easily leads to such a conclusion. Moreover, the language of the state failure literature bears frightening resemblance to the rhetoric used by European powers a century ago to justify colonization. Then, as now, African political entities were considered illegitimate and inferior because they failed to measure up to the standard of the Western nation-state ideal. Then, as now, the sovereignty of the Africans, and other Third World socio-political entities were delegitimized and ignored (Pretser 1992; Doty 1996; Grovogui 1996; Strang 1996; Dunn 1997).

This issue over language is not just a question of politically correct semantics: there are real policy implications. Let me offer just two examples. In his infamous article, Robert Kaplan (1994) sounded the warning bells of 'the coming anarchy.' The central piece of evidence for his world-going-to-hell-in-a-hand-basket scenario was the collapse of the state in Africa, particularly Sierra Leone. He described the situation as a breakdown of the social fabric that defied reason and had no political rationale whatsoever. In Kaplan's view, the reason for Sierra Leone's breakdown was because, well, it was Africa.² If his subtly racist stance was missed in his article, it is abundantly clear in his follow-up book where he proclaims that Africa is sliding back to the 'dawn' of time. In one memorable passage, Kaplan asserts that 'Africa's geography was conducive to humanity's emergence, [but] it may not have been conducive to its further development' (1996: 7). Thus, Africa cannot sustain basic elements of civilization, words that are frighteningly similar to those used by Henry Morton Stanley to justify the conquest of the Congo for King Leopold II of Belgium (Stanley 1885; Dunn 1997; see also Grovogui, Chapter 3 in this volume). Kaplan's argument employs and builds on the state failure literature. Most alarmingly, Kaplan's doomsday message of African neo-primitivism and a Western siege-mentality was faxed by the White House to every American embassy around the globe.

The other example is perhaps less alarming, but more disconcerting for me because I witnessed it personally. At a 1998 conference on 'Great

Power Responsibility' held at Boston University and attended by numerous academics and policy makers, Robert Jackson discussed the failure of the (quasi-)sovereign state in the Third World.³ To bluntly paraphrase, Jackson's message was: 'The West has made this mess and we are making it worse by our continued involvement.' Yet central to his presentation, and to the state failure literature in general, was the use of evolutionary language. Rhetoric that led easily into paternalistic posturing. Picking up not on Jackson's conclusions, but his rhetoric and their paternalistic overtones, the attendees began a lengthy discussion of the failure of 'African children' to master the institutions, practices, and concepts of their white patrons. Moreover, contemporary African states and leaders were characterized as 'surly and unruly teenagers.' Africa once again became a powerless void of backwardness open to the 'civilizing' mission of the Western powers. Suddenly it was 1884 and I was in Berlin.

What needs to be recognized is that the African state is not failing as much as is our understanding of the state. As the primary unit of analysis in IR theory, the state needs to be interrogated and reconceptualized. Clearly the state in Africa is not performing according to Western notions of statehood. Rather than blaming the second adjective (*African*) in this Madlib, I find it more fruitful to question the noun itself (*state*). In other words, my goal is to re-examine the very notion of the 'state.' This interrogation is extremely important since IR continues to employ the state as the primary – and unproblematic – unit of analysis. This chapter attempts to problematize that unit and show that the crisis of the state in Africa is not uniquely African, but intrinsically linked to the concept of the state itself.

In this chapter, I seek to question how the state is employed, conceived, and talked about in the existing literature. In the next section, I question the use of the state as the primary unit of analysis in IR. Much of the literature by Africanists has called into question the primacy, if not relevance, of the state for understanding and analyzing international relations. For example, see the contributions of Malaquias, Maclean, Swatuk, Hentz, and Shaw (Chapters 2, 10, 11, 12, and 13) in this volume. This chapter will briefly illustrate the limitations of state-centric approaches by noting important forces and actors highlighted by recent Africanist scholarship. In the final section, I will offer a long overdue reconceptualization of the state. It is my contention that understanding the state as a discursive construction leads to a far more productive and nuanced analysis of politics and international relations.

The limits of state-centric approaches

The sovereign nation-state is the primary unit of analysis for traditional mainstream IR theories. For neoliberalism, the state is the primary unit of analysis in their systemic explanation of international politics; all other actors are ignored or marginalized. Ken Waltz argues that 'So long as the major states are the major actors, the structure of international politics is defined in terms of them' (1979: 94). While the neo-liberal approach has succeeded in illustrating the importance of other forces in international relations – whether they be international organizations, international regimes, interdependent trade, or societal norms and rules – the state continues to retain its privileged and un-problematised position (Keohane and Nye 1977; Keohane 1984; Barkin and Cronin 1994; Deudney 1995; Strange 1995; Keohane and Milner 1996).

This almost myopic focus on the state is troublesome for at least two reasons. First, it treats the state as an unproblematised given. As K.J. Holsti has observed:

International Relations Theory, whether of the eighteenth- or twentieth-century varieties, assumes the state... These analyses are all based on the prototypical European or North American state. The social basis of the state – the political community – is assumed or at least it is not problematised. (1998: 109)

Secondly, and equally important, IR's myopic focus on the state ignores other actors that are just as, if not more, significant to understanding international relations. I will offer a reconceptualization of the state in the next section; for now let me briefly illustrate the ways in which a state-centric approach misses important elements of African international relations.

Questioning the analytical primacy of the state is obviously controversial, even among Africanists. For example, Leonardo Villalón has argued that

The state must be the central focus in any effort to understand comparatively the variety of political transformations on the continent. In part this focus is a function of the obvious: states are at the center of political systems elsewhere, perhaps particularly so in the case of Africa. (1998a: 8)

Yet, I reject the logic behind this position. The reason the state is central to political systems elsewhere is because of its hegemonic position in society. My contention is that the state in Africa has not achieved hegemonic domination over society. As Christopher Clapham has observed, 'the less solid the state, the greater the need to look beyond it for an understanding of how the society that it claims to govern fits into the international system' (1996: 5). In what follows I will briefly focus on just four examples of non-state actors which illustrate this point: international financial institutions (IFIs), regional strongmen ('Big Men' or 'warlords'), international business interests (particularly resource extracting ventures), and non-state military corporations.

International financial institutions (IFIs)

One cannot begin to make sense of the African political landscape without an understanding of the power and interests of IFIs, namely the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. To simply dismiss IFIs as extensions of hegemonic states is to grossly oversimplify reality. IFIs have their own interests and agendas in the international sphere. The case of Mozambique provides an excellent example of the importance of IFIs in African international relations, illustrating the limitations to a state-centric approach and beginning to problematize the very concept of 'state.'

Since joining the World Bank and IMF in 1984, Mozambique has lost significant autonomy and sovereignty as the line between domestic and international spheres has become increasingly blurred. At that time, IFIs began playing more concrete roles in the running of the country, transforming and limiting Mozambique's political and economic institutions (Bowen 1992; Simpson 1993; Dunn 1999). The Mozambican 'state' now exists to the extent that the Western lending agencies allow it to exist. David Plank describes the situations as 'recolonization,' and observes that 'public officials now have little choice but to do whatever the aid agencies demand of them' (1993: 417). Tom Young notes that

the sheer leverage of outside powers, and in particular the coordinating role of the IMF/World Bank, have subjected Mozambique to an extraordinary degree of foreign tutelage. Indeed, Mozambique has been made into a virtual laboratory for new forms of Western domination. (1995: 542)

In Mozambique and elsewhere in Africa, the state has become an extension of the international aid agencies rather than of the domestic

electorate.⁴ More significantly, authority within Mozambican society has become increasingly fragmented and dispersed among various state institutions, NGOs, donor agencies, foreign interests, and the international lending agencies.

Regional strongmen

In an insightful examination of African politics, Daniel Bach (1995) observes that, far enough away from state control, trans-state regional flows have led to a trend of 'deterritorialization' in which the state is being eroded and replaced. Yet, contrary to Western assumptions, state absence does not mean anarchy and chaos. Order is maintained by other socio-political organizations, such as traditional chieftancies and kinship alliances, that often defy territorial-based analytical approaches. Such African experiences highlight Joel Migdal's (1994) argument that the state is but one of many in a melange of competing social forces. In some African cases, the state has failed to achieve dominance and has succumbed to other social forces. One of the most important societal forces to challenge and replace the primacy of the state in Africa is the so-called 'Big Men' or 'warlords'.⁵ These regional strongmen are instrumental in understanding African politics and African international relations for they tend to dominate the political landscape in most African countries. What is important to note is that these regional 'Big Men' do not seek to overthrow the state or capture the State-House. They exist outside the state while simultaneously extracting resources from the system. Furthermore, these regional strongmen are increasingly successful at accessing the international sphere.⁶ Such patron-client relations that underpin African politics cannot be effectively understood or analyzed by state-centric approaches.

The case of former Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) offers interesting insights into the 'deterritorialization' of Africa and the role of regional strongmen. Before the end of the Cold War, Zaire's political system was characterized as a 'patrimonial state' where President Mobutu's 'absolutism' created a highly centralized administration built on patronage and extraction (Callaghy 1984). With the end of the Cold War, Mobutu's external resources dried up and his rule became increasingly reliant on the patronage of local strongmen. The state's control effectively ended a few hundred kilometers outside of Kinshasa, while the rest of the country operated through a web of complex power relations. Filip De Boeck's (1996) examination of the power and importance of traditional socio-political structures shows that the Zairian state was not the sole (or even central) harbinger of power – neither

locally nor internationally. These regional 'Big Men' had always been at the heart of the political system, but as the formal state structures withdrew and imploded, these forces were revealed in the full glare of publicity. As William Reno (1998b) observed, 'the exercise of political power in Zaire owes more to informal political networks based upon economic control, rather than formal notions of proper state behavior.' This situation remains virtually unchanged in Kabila's 'new' Congo. Local strongmen have created a complex web of power relations – often by accessing the international sphere – that defy explanation and description based on conventional concepts such as 'state', 'society', 'domestic', or 'international'. As the regional war in Central Africa aptly illustrates, political struggle has become focused on resources and trade, rather than on state institutions or formal declarations of authority.

Extractive corporations

Central to the existence of regional strongmen are international financial connections. These foreign companies provide the regional strongmen, as well as the regime, with lucrative profits and strong resource bases. In former Zaire and the 'new' Congo, foreign diamond mining companies have been critical for the survival of regional strongmen. In this case, the concept of sovereignty has become of primary importance in helping to legitimize deals with foreign firms and creditors. Sovereignty allows non-state actors, primarily foreign firms, to hide their partnerships behind a legal facade, simplifying questions concerning legitimacy of contracts and adherence to laws in the firm's home country. For the international community at large, the production of Zairian/Congolese sovereignty is essential because it 'leaves in place an interlocutor who acknowledges debts and provides a point of contact between foreign state officials and strongmen without raising politically disturbing questions of recognition' (Reno 1998b).

The power of these economic interests in shaping African politics and international relations should not be underestimated. On one level, the state and local strongmen use foreign corporations as a strong resource base. At another level, foreign firms have often been filling in for the missing state, performing functions and providing services typically relegated to the state. In Zaire/Congo basic infrastructure needs are often met by foreign firms. For instance, a US mining firm rebuilt an airport and a Polish firm refurbished a power station (Reno 1998b). In the south of the country, the diamond mining companies have long run the local social services and maintained the infrastructure. In the 1980s, Mobutu gave a West German firm virtual sovereignty over a 150,000-km

area of Zaire (Young and Turner 1985: 387–88). In Angola, both sides of the civil war are largely bankrolled by their ties with oil companies and the international (legal and illegal) diamond trade. Just as Mobutu was supported by US evangelist Pat Robertson largely because of the latter's diamond mining venture in Zaire (Lippman 1995), Kabila has enjoyed considerable support from Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe because of his personal (and protected) business investment in the extraction of Congolese diamonds. These international companies are largely, but not exclusively, resource-extracting ventures. An example of a non-extractive economic practice is the dumping of toxic waste, which has also proved highly profitable. One US company paid President Stevens of Sierra Leone \$25 million for such a privilege (Reno 1995: 173–78). Illegal economic organizations, such as international drug trafficking cartels, are also increasing in importance.

Non-state military corporations

Finally, the rise of non-state military corporations has become an important feature of African international relations. Perhaps the best known of these armies-for-hire is Executive Outcomes, a South African corporation made up primarily of former counter-insurgent experts from the apartheid era. Executive Outcomes, in addition to Frontline Security Services, Sandline International, and Gurkha Security Guards Ltd, are hired to provide military services for 'legitimately recognized' governments. They either supplement existing armies or, as in the case of Sierra Leone (Reno 1998a, 1998c; Francis 1999), provide an alternative military force to the standing army. These organized mercenary forces have also been key players in Angola, the Congo, and other African hot spots (Harker 1998).

Mercenaries have long played an important role on the politics of Africa, as the sordid history of the Congo/Zaire illustrates. Yet, what makes these new groups significant and unique is the way in which they operate. They are not simply mercenaries and 'hired guns,' but increasingly savvy international business operators. In the case of Executive Outcomes, payment is often given in business concessions, which are handled through its holding company Strategic Resources Corp. or subsidiaries such as Branch Energy. The soldiers occupy sections of territory and their business partners then move in to exploit the land for profit. In Sierra Leone and Angola, vast sections of the countries have been physically occupied, politically administered, and economically exploited by these organizations. How can IR theory explain situations where corporations, not states, hold the monopoly

on 'legitimate' violence? At the very least, the rise of the non-state military corporation raises interesting questions if one is to subscribe to Charles Tilly's (1990) theory that state making and war making are intrinsically linked.

In this section I have sought to provide merely four examples of the limitations of state-centric approaches in explaining African international relations. I do this in order to illustrate the need to move beyond approaches that privilege the state as a primary unit of analysis. However, I should stress that I am not arguing for the irrelevance of the state. Indeed, the state remains an important force in both African domestic politics and international relations. Rather I am illustrating, on one hand, that state-centric approaches have serious limitations for effectively understanding events on the continent. On the other hand, I am illustrating the need to redefine how we use the concept of the state. It is to this point that I now turn.

Rethinking the state

The state is not an ahistoric, natural given, but arose in Western Europe owing to specific historical and societal pressures (see Tilly 1975; McNeill 1982; Tilly 1990; Davidson 1992; Spruyt 1994). The nation-state as an institution reflected the needs and demands of a specific time and place. What has come to pass in IR theory is the unproblematic acceptance of the state. In this section I seek to problematize the concept by showing that generally accepted definitions of the state do not fit the African reality. Rather than presume that this is due to the African environment into which the state was thrust, I seek to offer a reconceptualization of the state itself.

Under the classic Weberian definition, most African states are unable to claim a monopoly on the means of violence, legitimate or otherwise. Furthermore, claims of territorial integrity are highly dubious as vast sections of territory remain outside the control of many African governments. As Africans have increasingly chosen to 'disengage' and distance themselves from predatory and parasitic governments, the continent is increasingly made up of 'states without citizens' (Ayode 1988). Since citizenship, territorial integrity, and monopoly on the tools of coercion are all considered prerequisites for statehood, this raises serious doubts about whether African states are in fact states at all. One of the most insightful discussions of politics in Africa is the work by Chabal and Daloz (1999). Importantly, the authors argue that the state in Africa – colonial and post-colonial – *never* met the requirements established by

Weber because it failed to be institutionalized. They note that the state in Africa is not 'collapsing,' because there effectively never was a 'state' to begin with.

While the general Africanist literature provides a more nuanced discussion of the state than is often found in IR, I would argue that there needs to be further work on theorizing the very notion of the 'state.' As I have noted at the beginning of this chapter, the current trend in Africanist scholarship is to focus on the inadequacies or shortcomings of the state in Africa. That is, how African states have failed to live up to the standards of their older Western 'brothers.' I suggest that the problem has much less to do with Africa than with how we conceptualize the state.

I argue that the state in Africa – indeed, the 'state' in any context (whether it be Belgium, Botswana, or Bulgaria) – is best conceived of as a *discursive construction*. I will provide an explanation of what I mean, then illustrate the usefulness of this approach to understanding African international relations in particular and IR theory in general.

Let me begin by stating what I do not mean. When I argue that the state is a discursive construct, that is *not* to say that the state is not 'real.' Clearly, there is something quite real about the Nigerian state when its army kicks down your door. Too often critics of approaches which employ discursive analyses make the false assumption that these approaches deny the 'reality' of the subject being discussed.⁷ Quite the contrary. Discourses make the subject 'real.' A discursive analysis approach is one that examines the discourses which construct the *reality* of the subject.

Part of the problem can be rectified by explicitly stating what a 'discourse' is. A discourse is a structured, relational totality. As Roxanne Doty (1996) observed,

A discourse delineates the terms of intelligibility whereby a particular 'reality' can be known and acted upon. When we speak of a discourse we may be referring to a specific group of texts, but also importantly to the *social practices* to which those texts are inextricably linked... [A] discourse enables one to make sense of things, enables one to 'know' and to act upon what one 'knows'. (1996: 6, emphasis added)

Discourses are not simply ideas, but are also the actions, thoughts, and practices that make that idea a 'reality' by structuring and delineating that reality, thereby making it knowable. When I speak of the discursive constructions of the state, I am referring not only to the idea of the state

at the abstract level, but also the actions and practices that reify the state, that make the abstraction 'concrete.'

What is significant about discourses is that they are inherently open-ended and incomplete. Moreover, there are a plurality of discourses at any given time on any given subject. Thus, there are discourses of the state. Each discourse attempts to establish closure and dominance over other discourses, but is incapable of establishing a closed, stable, and fixed position. A discourse legitimizes certain actions and beliefs, while delegitimizing others. In other words, the 'reality' of the state is forever up in the air as the discourses that define it compete for dominance. To quote Doty again, 'It is the overflowing and incomplete nature of discourses that opens up spaces for change, discontinuity, and variation' (1996: 6).

So, then, how is the state discursively constructed? As a starting point, let me draw briefly from the insightful work of Timothy Mitchell (1991). Mitchell observes that the definition of the state in traditional literature always depends on distinguishing it from society. But such a line is difficult to draw in practice. The reason for that is because the state is an 'effect' discursively produced by society. Mitchell argues that the state is a common ideological and cultural construct. For Mitchell,

a construct like the state occurs not merely as a subjective belief, incorporated in the thinking and action of individuals. It is repressed and reproduced in visible everyday forms, such as the language of legal practice, the architecture of public buildings, the wearing of military uniforms, or the marking out and policing of frontiers. (1991: 81)

This does not mean that the line between state and society is illusory. Producing and maintaining the distinction between state and society – or between the domestic and international spheres – is itself a mechanism that generates resources of power, as the earlier discussion of regional strongmen and their access to the international system apply illustrates.

For Mitchell, the state should not be taken as a free-standing entity. The state is more than just a phenomenon of decision making and policy. It should be addressed as an effect of detailed processes of spatial organization, temporal arrangement, functional specification, and supervision and surveillance. As Mitchell observes, 'The state needs to be analyzed as such a structural effect... it should be examined not as an actual structure, but as the powerful, metaphysical effect of practices

that make such structures appear to exist' (1991: 94). That is to say, the state is a structural effect produced by societal discourses.

How then do we analyze the discursive construction of the state? For international relations, one fruitful starting place is examining how a state's sovereignty – its key to international acceptance – is discursively employed. Thomas Biersteker and Cynthia Weber have pointed out that one must explore

the constitutive relationship between the state and sovereignty: the ways the meaning of sovereignty is negotiated out of interactions within intersubjectively identifiable communities; and the variety of ways in which practices construct, reproduce, reconstruct, and deconstruct both state and sovereignty... [For] neither state nor sovereignty should be assumed or taken as given, fixed, or immutable. (1996: 11)

The previous discussion of how IFIs, extractive corporations, and regional strongmen (re)construct sovereignty illustrates ways in which the production of sovereignty and statehood are complex and varied.

At the same time, we can also observe the actions that make up the state and reify the abstract concept of the state (see Weber 1995, 1998). These are the social practices – performances, if you will – that enable and are enabled by the 'state.' One can explore the multiplicity of ways that the 'state' is produced through 'performativity.' In other words, there is a need for an analysis of the performativity of the state. Cynthia Weber defines performativity as 'the ongoing citational processes whereby "regular subjects" and "standards of normality" are discursively constituted to give the effect that both are natural rather than cultural constructs' (1998: 81). Military parades, custom checks, tax collections, national press conference are example of actions – or performativity – that help reify 'stateness.' States that are able to perform these everyday attributes of 'stateness' are considered solid, strong, substantial states. Entities that have limited ability to perform such attributes are regarded as weaker. It is important to note that these state performances are based on the 'script' of stateness supplied by the dominant discourses. Western states are considered 'strong' in part because they seem to 'act' more like states than most Third World states. If this 'performativity' of stateness seems trite, simply observe the actions of new regimes when they come into power. For example, when Laurent Kabila's forces came to power in Kinshasa, their first actions were to rename the state, produce a new national flag, and

issue a new currency – vital actions which should be regarded as attempts to 'perform' stateness.

Let me stress once again that there is never one discourse, but multiple discourses at any given moment. A discursive analysis of the state should examine which discourses are being employed, by whom, for what ends, and to what effects. This multiplicity of state discourses is extremely important, for in Africa there is open competition between discourses from a wide range of sources, internationally and domestically. I argue that what we have in Africa is not simply a crisis of the state but also a crisis in the dominant (Western) discourse of the state.

The dominant Western discourse of the state can be regarded somewhat synonymously with what Jackson and Rosberg (1982b) referred to as 'juridical' statehood. The modern international system has historically evolved by perpetuating and privileging the Western discourse of the state and delegitimizing others (Watson 1992). A state is not a state unless it is recognized by other states – often through membership in the UN or as the recognized recipient of foreign aid. Juridical statehood can be conferred only by the international community, despite the fact that a political system may possess some or all of the empirical qualifications of statehood. Christopher Clapham has observed that, 'In practice, the existence of states within the international system has always been governed to an appreciable extent by the conventions of that system itself, which in turn have usually been established by tacit or explicit agreement between its currently leading states' (1996: 16).

The dominant discourses of the state are not just abstract ideas, but are closely tied in with social practices. These discourses enable certain policies to be employed, the effectiveness of which cannot be over-emphasized. As Clapham has noted:

Once international recognition came to be a major factor in determining the powers of governments, and once these governments did not effectively control much of their formal territory, then the question even of who *was* the government was decided, at least to some degree, by outside states, rather than by people within the state itself. (1996: 21, emphasis in original)

Central to this process of recognition and engagement are the ways in which international forces – IFIs and foreign economic interests – employ discourses of the state. Just as European powers produced a colonial discourse that delegitimized African politics and sovereignty at the turn of the century (Grovogui 1996; Strang 1996), IFIs have been

employing their own discourse on the state and sovereignty over the past decade (Terguson 1994). In Mozambique, for example, the IMF and the World Bank constructs the state in a way that delegitimizes its economic autonomy because of its past failures. The discourse employed by the lending agencies produces a Mozambique whose autonomy and sovereignty are curtailed by the dominant orthodoxy of economic neo-liberalism. Yet, the lending agencies also rely on a construction of legitimate sovereignty for Mozambique in order to ensure the execution of their policies. The implementation of harsh austerity measures depends upon the existence of a sovereign state; the state's repressive capability is necessary to ensure the delivery of the 'medicine' of structural adjustment. At the same time, the lending agencies rely upon the existence of sovereign state institutions to provide the legitimizing facade for their work within a country. In Mozambique, sovereignty provides the legal framework for a full range of 'legitimate' international agreements. It simplifies deals between NGOs, development agencies, and foreign investors. In the case of Mozambique, the sovereignty discourse has produced a government whose primary function is to be an interlocutor for the aid agencies.

Mohammed Ayoub has argued that the Third World nations

have had no choice in terms of determining the organization of their politics according to their needs. They have been obliged to adopt the model of the sovereign, territorial state (with the corollary that every state must evolve into a nation-state) as the exclusive form of organization to order their political lives. (1998: 41)

But here I disagree. Even though African elites may have accepted the concept of the state, they have constructed and employed it according to their own needs and contexts. That is to say, they have discursively reinvented the state, while simultaneously employing other discourses of the state. One should not presume the omnipotence of the First World or the powerlessness of Africans. One must always historicize and contextualize the state concept. It is crucial to realize that while international forces are constructing various discourses of the state in Africa for their own interests, Africans are often exploiting such discourses for their own enrichment. For example, the Sierra Leonean government of Valentine Strasser used the state as a legal facade by which to conduct business with the international community, specifically with the IFIs (Reno 1998a). In the former Zaire (as well as what is left of the 'new' Congo), domestic strongmen and external

(international) actors discursively produce and employ the state as a shield behind which power is generated and practiced, where international affairs are conducted and legitimized.

African political elites often use the dominant state discourse to extract resources from the international community in a 'legitimate' manner – from access to much-needed credit and economic investment to the shipment of arms and material goods. But Africans also employ multiple, often conflictual, discourses of the state, depending on their needs and contexts. This can best be explained by what Chabal and Daloz (1999) refer to as the 'different registers' employed by Africans. What often looks like a 'retraditionalization' of African politics, they argue, is in fact a result of how Africans employ both modern and traditional registers.⁸ That is to say, they exist in both the modern and traditional spheres. As the authors write,

[Our approach] emphasizes the extent to which Africans operate on several different registers – from the most visibly modern to the most ostensibly traditional – in their everyday lives. The failure to understand the apparently contradictory nature of politics in Africa is itself very largely the result of an analytical convention which tends to assume a paradigmatic dichotomy between the realms of the modern and of the traditional. The African elites, however, operate in a world which combines both, a world congruent with the beliefs of the rest of the population. (1999:46)

Operating in the context of multiple registers means that the state is also discursively constructed in different, often contradictory, ways.⁹ At one level, the state is employed as a vehicle which allows access to resources from the international sphere. At another level, the state is seen as an instrument by which to foster and strengthen vertical, patrimonial relations. At a third level, the state is employed as a stage upon which to perform very important rituals of ostentation, which themselves are forms of vertical symbolic redistributions (see Chabal and Daloz 1999, esp. Chapter 3). At a fourth level, the state is seen as something to be avoided and attacked. And so forth.

What results are multiple discourses – texts, utterances, and social practices – of the state in Africa. These discourses are often contradictory and seem to be outside the realm of Western rationality. Yet, there are important logics behind the construction and employment of these discourses. The Western discourse on the state that IR theorists hold to be (and help maintain as) dominant is but one discourse being

employed. What is needed is an approach that examines *which* discourses are being constructed and employed, by *whom*, to *what ends*, and to *what effects*. Continuing to treat the state as an unproblematic concept in our approach to international relations (African or otherwise) privileges the dominant Western discourse and blinds us to the complexities of reality. Not only does it limit the view of African politics and international relations, but, as I noted at the beginning of this chapter, it can also produce troubling and dangerous policy prescriptions.

It is the height of Western arrogance to presume that the so-called failure of the dominant state model in Africa is evidence of African backwardness or premodernity. Such a view stems from the belief that Africans, as well as the rest of the non-Western world, must accept Western models in order to progress or develop. Such a view unquestioningly assumes the superiority of Western knowledge and political practices. It blinds the observer to the existence of alternatives. In the case of Africa, the state is being discursively produced in ways that defy preconceived Western notions. What is occurring in Africa is not the absence of politics, as some would have us believe, but the practice of politics in complex and original ways. As scholars we need to reject models based on Western arrogance and examine these alternative forms of socio-political organizations. We should realize that the ways in which Africans discursively construct the state and international relations represent not the mire of a premodern past, but the face of an uncharted future.

Notes

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1. For two examples, see Clapham (1996) and Neuman (1998). Neuman argues that 'Even central concepts such as anarchy, the state, sovereignty, rational choice, alliance, and the international system are troublesome when applied to the Third World' (1998: 2). I argue that the source of the trouble is intrinsic to the concepts themselves, not the Third World context into which they are thrust. See Dunn (2000).
2. For an excellent critique of Kaplan, see Richards (1996).
3. For insightful critiques of Jackson's views on quasi-sovereignty (1990), see Inayatullah (1996); Doty (1996); and Grovogui, Chapter 3 in this volume.

4. Jackson and Rosberg (1982b) argued that the African 'juridical' state was an unintended by-product of the international society and its focus on sovereignty. Yet, what exists in Mozambique is a post-colonial state whose (re)deconstruction has been intentional.
5. Chabal and Daloz (1999) make a distinction between the two groups, arguing that 'Big Men' are regional leaders who enjoy legitimacy from their 'constituents' while warlords do not. Furthermore, I recognize the use of gendered language surrounding discussions of 'Big Men' and warlords. It should be noted that females, particularly market women in urban centers, often act as formidable non-state actors.
6. For an excellent discussion of the role of warlords in Africa and their access the international sphere, see Reno (1998c). For an examination of how strongmen extract resources via the state, see Bayart, Ellis and Hibou (1998).
7. Take for example Leonardo Villalón's (1998b) review of Grovogui's *Sovereigns, Quasi-Sovereigns, and Africans* (1996).
8. See also Emmanuel Terray's (1986) insightful discussion of the worlds of the 'air conditioner' and 'veranda' in African politics.
9. Thus when Chabal and Daloz (1999) argue that the 'state' never existed in Africa in the first place, what is more correct is to recognize that the dominant discourse of stateness was never fully ascribed to – either by the colonizing officials or the post-colonial African rulers. Rather, other discourses of stateness were and are employed.