State Failure and Challenges to Democratization in Africa

When Things Fell Apart: State Failure in Late-Century Africa. By Robert H. Bates. 216p. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. $19.99.

Jeffrey Herbst
doi:10.1017/S1537592709210863

Robert H. Bates's new book *When Things Fell Apart* seeks to make a contribution in two different areas. Explicitly, it joins a large literature on why state institutions collapsed in sub-Saharan Africa, especially why leaders drove one economy after the next into the ground. Less emphatically stated but clear enough from the book's content and its structure is an important contribution to political science's "culture wars" over the use of different types of evidence, especially the sometimes competing claims for the primacy of country knowledge, game-theoretic modeling, and large cross-national data sets. In particular, Bates uses a deductive approach, where game-theoretic approaches are married to national outcomes through a deep immersion in the literature and intuition (a concept he clearly seeks to rehabilitate) and then tested by the use of a significant and original database that is nonetheless relegated to an appendix. This is a particularly important approach because no one would accuse Bates of being at all hostile to large-scale quantitative analysis. Indeed, the significant data collection at Harvard's Africa Research Program (http://africa.gov.harvard.edu), which he helped found, is a service to the discipline.

Bates begins the book by setting up a simple fable. He argues that *"the possibility of political order rests on the value of three variables: the level of public revenues, the rewards from predation, and the specialist's rate of discount"* (p. 20) (Bates calls rulers "specialists in violence"). The first of these three variables is not controversial. Bates has a strong case when he argues that declining public revenues (due to revenue shocks and spiraling bad economic performance) reduced the interest of rulers in good governance and increased incentives for predation. As it became ever more difficult to maintain popularity by providing resources to the public through the regular governmental process, leaders shrank the political arena and maintained support instead through patronage networks. The more or less inevitable route was authoritarian governments that had increasingly narrow constituencies. The end result was a set of economic and policy choices that helped leaders stay in power but that had increasingly disastrous impacts on societies.

The argument is hardly new; indeed, Bates himself did much to explain the political logic of disastrous economic policies in his landmark 1983 book on the political economy of agricultural development, *Markets and States in Tropical Africa*. However, he does not attempt to build on his basic fable and the work done to date to explain why different countries have experienced different levels of predation. Telling examples are drawn from Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), and Zimbabwe, among others, but predation varies even among these sad cases. For instance, no leader in Africa has managed to develop as systematic a means of destruction as Robert Mugabe's land grabs and the policy-induced inflation rate of over a million percent.

Bates is also on very solid ground by noting that natural resources provided significant rewards for predation, the second aspect of the fable. Natural resources can be exploited by governments even as the rest of the economy atrophies. Bates's citation of oil producers as especially dysfunctional is also reasonable because oil is a particularly lucrative source of income that benefits precious few people. Natural resources became ever more important to leaders as their own dysfunctional policies caused other sectors of the economy to shut down. Some special attention is given to Angola, Sudan, and Zaire, and these certainly are stories where natural resources have played a particularly obvious role in the decline of national economies. However, the resource story in other countries—especially those without hard minerals—is more complicated and subtle.

The final aspect of Bates's fable is what he calls the discount rate. In particular, he argues that the political liberalization that occurred in Africa beginning in the late

Jeffrey Herbst is the Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs at Miami University.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592709210863 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1980s made leaders insecure and therefore accelerated predation. Indeed, he posits something of a spiral downward as citizens, fed up with the predation of their leaders, sought political reforms that, in turn, accelerated the temptation of rulers to rule by theft and patronage because the narrow foundations of their rule were collapsing. While political reform is certainly a factor in the decline of some countries, it is not at all obvious that it can be tied to economic deterioration in the same way as the other drivers of Bates's fable. The timing is particularly problematic because the wave of democratization in Africa occurred long after the patterns of predation were already well established. Political reform also varied considerably from country to country, with some leaders giving way quite easily (e.g., Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia) while others were ousted in the midst of chronic decline that does fit Bates's general model (e.g., Mobutu of Zaire) and other leaders were not displaced at all.

More generally, the wave of democratization in Africa has accorded with an improvement in governance in some countries, although the continent as a whole is still governed very poorly. Indeed, Bates largely ignores the beneficial effects of democratization on economic performance, including the greater probability that a dysfunctional leader might actually be forced to leave, as well as the establishment of institutions where majorities can demand better economic performance from their governments.

Although not formally in the fable, there is a chapter devoted to what Bates calls "subnational tensions." The basic argument is that African societies are inherently expansionary and therefore have generated "competing claims for land" (p. 75). Under regimes that promoted good governance, competing land claims could have been managed, but in the negative sum games that African politics generated, local conflicts were exacerbated and became intertwined with disputes at the national level. The cases of Kenya and Ethiopia are explored at some length; however, no attempt is made to systematically explore the feedback loops between national and local politics. This is a particularly interesting topic because in some cases, economic and political decline led to mass violence (e.g., Liberia, Sierra Leone), while in others, decline caused terrible deprivation but very little violence. For instance, both Tanzania and Ghana experienced tremendous economic decline during the 1970s and 1980s, but neither experienced mass violence. Indeed, Ghana in 1983, near the lowest point of an economic decline that caused almost all institutions to stop functioning, absorbed hundreds of thousands of nationals who had been expelled from Nigeria, one of the great humanitarian efforts by a desperately poor country.

Bates's fable is rich but he does not fully leverage the different factors in his model to explain the varying outcomes in Africa. Understanding the variations that the model could produce is especially important because perhaps the greatest trend in Africa since independence in the 1960s has been the increasing heterogeneity of the continent; very few countries have done well, many have experienced a decline, and a few have experienced outright collapse. The contours of the generally negative performance have been understood for some time. It is the impetus for the heterogeneity that is the greatest challenge facing those who seek to explain Africa's performance. This challenge has only become more acute as some countries have experienced improved governance (e.g., Ghana) while others seem mired in failure (e.g., Congo and Somalia).

There may be room for additional exploration that would examine what happens when the different drivers in the "fable" move in different directions. Bates is clearly arguing from strength when all three drivers are going in the same direction, and they do, to some extent, feed off of each other. However, it is certainly possible that they could also be moving in different directions. A self-confident regime (i.e., one with a low discount rate) in an oil-producing state would be one example. What does the fable suggest given such cross-currents? In particular, is one or another of the drivers more important than the others? Such an exploration might provide greater insight into Africa's heterogeneity.

Although Bates does not dwell on the point, he also makes an interesting contribution to methodological discussions. There has been an enormous amount of good work done over the last 10 years to develop high-quality quantitative data in sub-Saharan Africa on a host of political phenomena in the developing world. Significant progress has been made in the measurement of public opinion, the coding of different political phenomena, and the understanding of the different types of political regimes. At best, these data have been used judiciously by authors to comprehend heretofore poorly understood phenomena. A large number of papers have also taken advantage of the newly developed data sources to simply throw together correlations without ever developing an underlying political model that would explain why their findings are significant, robust, or even plausible.

Bates is clearly reacting against the onslaught of theoretically underdeveloped statistical findings by repeatedly developing the game-theoretic logic behind different phenomena first and then tying those theoretical propositions to national developments by referencing case studies, comparative work, and cross-national findings. However, the bulk of the cross-national work in the book is relegated to a 31-page appendix that allows the author to present more detailed statistical findings and explicate their sources. This is an interesting stylistic choice that to me made the book marginally harder to read because I was constantly flipping between the text and the appendix. Readers probably would have appreciated somewhat more of the statistical work in the main body of the text,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592709210863 Published online by Cambridge University Press

leaving the truly heavy-going work for the appendix. At the very least, references in the text to where the statistical analysis appeared in the appendix would have been helpful.

Irrespective of stylistic issues, Bates has clearly issued a methodological challenge. Tying game-theoretic models explicitly to national outcomes and then developing credible proof using a range of evidence is clearly a powerful approach. It requires an impressive knowledge of the political science literature, quantitative techniques, and area studies work. The author also makes clear that his extensive fieldwork in Africa has influenced the models he chooses to develop. *When Things Fell Apart* has a lofty set of methodological ambitions and goes a considerable way to defining what "rigor" should actually mean in the study of national outcomes, not only in Africa but also the rest of the world.

Overall, Bates has produced a book that will serve as an important summary of the political dynamics of state failure in Africa, especially as it was experienced in the 1980s and 1990s. Some African countries have moved on. As a result, state failure today does coexist with some countries that are on the rise and with many others that are somewhere in between. The great challenge for the future will be to explain this increasingly complex set of outcomes using all of the methodological tools that Bates has deployed.

James D. Fearon

doi:10.1017/S153759270922086X

When Things Fell Apart manages to be wonderfully concise but still compelling. The thing Robert Bates seeks to explain is the secular trend in sub-Saharan Africa toward civil war, although he often characterizes this in broader terms, as a trend toward "political conflict" or "political disorder." He explains the trend as follows: Public revenues fell in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of commodity price declines, effects of the second oil shock, and bad economic policy choices that overtaxed farmers so that politicians could dispense patronage to smaller, politically more important urban constituencies. The decline in public revenues led elites to become more predatory, which caused an increase in political conflict by mobilizing opposition. Popular demands for political reform, along with increased international pressure for the same at the end of the Cold War, heightened elite insecurity and led to more predation. This had the effect of "provoking their citizens to take up arms" (p. 109). Further, state decline and national-level conflicts exacerbated simmering subnational conflicts, typically in the form of land disputes between locals and migrants from other tribes.

I think that this composite, stylized sequence captures important aspects of the story for many sub-Saharan countries, even if it does not fit any one country's decline into civil war perfectly. The comments that follow are mainly suggestions about how further research might flesh out Bates's theoretical argument and better test its main empirical claims.

The first is a matter of theory. Bates suggests that political order is like a cooperative equilibrium in a repeated prisoner's dilemma game between citizens and the ruler. Order is more likely to break down when the ruler's temptation to "defect"—to prey on citizens rather than to protect their productive activities—increases. The temptation to defect increases when the value of the cooperative status quo declines for the ruler. The author associates the value of the cooperative equilibrium for African rulers with their tax revenues. Thus, revenue declines from external economic shocks and the effects of politically driven bad economic policies are said to have increased leaders' incentives to destroy political order.

This argument does not work, however, if the decline in tax revenue causes a proportional decline in the ruler's payoffs from predation. When tax revenue is smaller, there is less to grab; when the economy is weaker, license monopolies are worth less; when peasants are poorer, there is less to steal from them. Bates notes this himself when he argues against a common proposal for explaining the association

James D. Fearon is Theodore and Frances Geballe Professor in the School of Humanities and Sciences and Chair of the Department of Political Science at Stanford University.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592709210863 Published online by Cambridge University Press