

Review - Routledge Handbook of African Politics

Written by Jörg Wiegratz

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JÖRG WIEGRATZ, AUG 5 2013

Routledge Handbook of African Politics

By: Nic Cheeseman, David Anderson, Andrea Scheibler (eds.)

London and New York: Routledge, 2013

The publication of the *Routledge Handbook of African Politics* earlier this year is a major event for the discipline of African Studies. Edited by Nic Cheeseman, David Anderson and Andrea Scheibler, the book brings together a remarkable group of established scholars and emerging researchers based mainly at universities in Europe, North America and Africa. Several of the 35 contributors are among the leading experts in their respective subject fields and have advanced key debates about African politics for years, and in some cases, decades. The editorial team has to be congratulated upon succeeding to recruit such a calibre and range of expertise for their project and to merge this knowledge and experience into a structured, cohesive, and accessible volume. This alone should make the handbook an informative and insightful reference point for various groups; including undergraduates, post-graduate students, researchers, policymakers and practitioners. In fact, it should be of use for anyone who is interested in learning about key political issues on the continent and related economic, social and cultural matters.

The book is divided into six thematic parts that contain a broad range of topics with all together 32 issue chapters.

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The thematic parts are: the politics of the state; the politics of identity; the politics of conflict; democracy and electoral politics; political economy and development; and international relations. Thankfully, the editors have approached the subject of politics in a wider sense. Thus one of the strengths of the book is its interdisciplinary character with authors from the Political Science, Anthropology, Economics, Development Studies and History disciplines.

Furthermore, effectively all the chapters have been written exclusively for the handbook. Readers therefore get an up-to-date and cutting edge text that covers not only long-standing topics of African politics – e.g. class politics, neopatrimonialism, religion, ethnicity, civil war – but also some of the more recent issues such as post-conflict peacebuilding, transitional justice, power sharing, women in politics, informal practices of civil servants, the privatisation of force and violence, and the growing influence of China.

Each of the chapters is about 6,500 words long and includes a literature list. This medium-size chapter length is another strength of the book. It helps to keep elaborations about complex themes and vast literatures neat, cogent and reader-friendly. It also allows enough space to go beyond only brief and introductory remarks of the kind that one typically finds, say, in a book about political concepts. Instead, in this handbook authors give an overview of the main arguments, theories and empirical material related to the respective chapter topic. This feature- relatively short but effectively written chapters that add up to a book length of 437 pages- should be useful not only for new students of African politics and development but also more advanced readers who can find valuable entries both within and outside their expertise as a starting point from which to branch off into a wider body of literature. Given the above characteristics, the handbook should not only be of help for students of 'politics' but also those with an economic, social, legal or any other core background and interest, and will hopefully encourage cross-disciplinary engagement and communication. The handbook gives 'new arrivals' of African politics a functional introduction to the rich and broad-ranging debates and findings of the decades-long scholarship in this area and should encourage students to read more and analyse and discuss African politics in all its variety.

Another strength of the handbook is that readers also get some insights into some of the latest research efforts, for instance the recently concluded Africa Power and Politics Programme, which contributors Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan and Tim Kelsall were involved in. Kelsall, who made an important intervention with his article 'Going with the grain in African development' (2008), uses his chapter to revisit that article. He provides an outline of the original argument, considers a number of objections, and finally reflects on the debate in light of recent empirical findings. This way, the reader gets an effective and nuanced overview of the latest progression of this key exchange in the contemporary scholarship about African politics. If the reader studies this text along with, for instance, that of de Sardan – and some of the other chapters about social practices and related issues of norms, values, power and conflict – a lot of ground on African politics is covered.

While this review cannot address the whole volume, some important shortcomings should be highlighted. The chapter on 'Africa and the global economy', for example, at times uncritically reproduces a rather liberal narrative. Furthermore, there are some key topics of African politics that the handbook does not cover in great detail, such as imperialism and neoliberalism. Though the issue of foreign (and especially Western) intervention in African politics and political economy is at times acknowledged in passing – and addressed in more detail in the chapter about democracy promotion for instance – this reviewer wished to have seen a more extensive and explicit analysis of this topic. The same holds for the issue of how neoliberal policies and programmes have changed African societies – politically, economically, socially, and culturally. Readers who wish to venture into the literature on the latter topic might be helped by consulting for instance the books *Neoliberal Africa*, *The World Bank and Africa* (both Graham Harrison), and *Poverty and Neoliberalism* (Ray Bush) or the work of this reviewer on neoliberal moral restructuring ('Fake capitalism?'). In addition, the next edition of this Handbook might not only consider a glossary of key terms but also chapters on, say, environmental politics (see e.g. Patrick Bond and Carl Death) or the political economy of economic fraud.

That said, this reviewer has already started to recommend the handbook to students. For introductory student learning purposes for instance, it can be used alongside books such as *An Introduction to African Politics* (Alex Thomson), *Africa: A Beginner's Guide* (Tom Young), *Issues in the Contemporary Politics of Sub-Saharan Africa* (Graham Harrison), and *The Political Economy of Africa* (Vishnu Padayacheer, ed.). Hopefully, the *Handbook of*

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African Politics will come out soon in paperback form so as to make this very important contribution to our understanding and debate about African Politics affordable and accessible to a broader readership.

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