

Interview – Pierre Englebert

Written by E-International Relations

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Pierre Englebert is the H. Russell Smith Professor of International Relations at Pomona College and a Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council. Prior to that, he worked at the World Bank in West Africa for four years. His research focuses on weak states, democratization and state formation in Africa, postcolonial state formation, and secessionism. He has published five books and more than twenty articles on African politics and development. His book *State Legitimacy and Development in Africa* (2000) was a *Choice Outstanding Book* and has been cited more than 700 times. *Africa: Unity, Sovereignty and Sorrow* (2009) earned the Best Book Award from the African Politics Conference Group in 2010.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I concentrate on African studies. The topics I found interesting to work on include the nature of the state, the way that the state is changing, challenges in exiting African States, such as Congo and Nigeria, the rise of new states, and Secessionism. When thinking about the fifty four states in Africa, you can also problematize them, which a lot of scholarship does. For example, some research could examine the discrepancies between Northern and Southern Nigeria, investigating why certain regions develop different sets of rules in violation of the constitution. Thus, if you look at Nigeria, you may find not one Nigeria but a multitude of actors that produce statehood. This is the type of research I find exciting. Meanwhile, a lot of African scholars produce works from grassroots, or empirical perspectives. Their focus differs from scholars like me, but is also interesting.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

There is a notion of development, the idea that countries are situated on a trajectory and they change from poor to advanced. In other words, they industrialize, democratize, or modernize. I used to teach a class called the political economy of development. Then, I stopped believing in development, the notion that there is a predetermined trajectory. I think this concept tends to encourage people to equate modernization with westernization. Moving away from this idea, I understand development not as a fact, a long-term trend, but as an ideology.

In your book, *Africa: Unity, Sovereignty and Sorrow*, you explore the question of why Africans refrain themselves from “exiting” the state. How does answering this question enrich one’s understanding of African statehood?

When I did this research, the fact that Africans refrain themselves from exit, the option of seeking to secede, to break away from the country they belong to, puzzled me. Many states in Africa appeared to be dysfunctional. They appeared not to produce the kind of collective action, governance, and welfare that their citizens demand and are entitled to. But why does this failure, this weak performance, not trigger a strong desire for citizens to just walk away and try something else? To explore this question, I went to peripheral regions, away from the capital. These regions tend to have a different ethnic profile than the rest of the country, have natural resources, and may seem good candidates that favor “exit.” However, they are not doing that. Interviewing local elites, I found these elites can derive significant benefits from being connected to the sovereign state. If they try to break away from it, they will not enjoy these benefits and need to make efforts to build effective statehood. Thus, it is in their interests to remain connected

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to the state and mobilize the resources to dominate the population at the local level. In this way, African states become recognized, regardless of the status of the state. For example, Somalia is recognized as a state. But if you go to Somalia, you may find there is no country there. However, it still has a seat at the United Nations. Hence, sovereignty is given to countries and can be a real resource for elites, which is crucial to understand African states in general.

In your edited book, *Secessionism in African Politics*, you discuss secessionism in Africa through a comparative perspective. What is the significance of this approach?

The specialists writing the chapters of this book are very knowledgeable about very narrow topics. They can give detailed treatment of these topics. When putting their accounts together, you start notice patterns, variations, and commonalities that go into the core of the comparative method. For example, one of the findings of the book indicates that various secessionist movements are mere postures. They are not really advocating for secessionism, but are using it as a signaling device to gain certain benefits. This is applicable to at least a third of the cases. For some secessionist movements, the point is to use the conflict as a way to improve their lot within their region. For example, someone who might have been sidelined in order of succession for some local authority role might start a secessionist conflict to outbid current leaders and rise in the hierarchy. Thus, bringing many people with different expertise together and sharing their findings can produce valuable results.

How does colonialism complicate secessionism in Africa?

Anytime in the post-colonial environment, the state is likely to be more arbitrary and artificial. An arbitrary state, a state without historical roots in society, is likely to have weak legitimacy. Therefore, the propensity of groups that seek to break away from the state is higher. For example, Pakistan broke away from India in 1947. When a state is a post colony, it has not endured a long process of state formation, which allows national identity to be widely shared. Thus, secessionism is one of the possible manifestation of the fact that the nation has not come together around the state. But secessionism can happen in other environments as well. For example, in China, Tibet has a secessionist movement. So sometimes regional groups can develop peripheral nationalism and resist the dominant group that attempts to include them. Hence, secessionist movements do not have to take place in a post-colonial environment, but are more likely to occur in this environment.

What are some of the most severe threats that establish obstacles to security in Africa? What are some challenges of postcolonial state formation and development?

Poverty. Even though African countries have increased their income over several decades quite significantly and a middle class has started to form in some of these countries, the poverty rate still remains high. In countries like Congo, 70% of the population is poor. This kind of human destitution can lead to violence. The possibility of people resorting to violent activities rises, as they are poor and have less to lose. Further, the continued arbitrariness of states can pose threats to security in Africa. A strong sense of identity has not developed and episodes of social contracting have not occurred in many African states. In this regard, these states are fragile. In these states, the younger generation is very alienated from the state. This also increases the potential for violence. The third factor is international terrorism, or Islamic extremism. These states are very susceptible to the assaults of terrorists. In Mali, the government controls not even one third of its territory. These states survive largely because of the intervention of foreign powers. That intervention itself is not a long-term solution, it is just a bandage. Lastly, when African countries were created as colonies, they were viewed as providers of natural resources. They continue to rely on this type of commodity even today, which is not sustainable. This colonial legacy has made it difficult for them to diversify the economy.

As a Professor at a liberal arts college in the U.S., how do you address the Eurocentric biases in political research on African politics and development?

In my field of African studies, for a long time, lots of scholarship was produced in the west. Many people writing about Africa, including me, were professionals in western universities. This may create some problems. European scholars

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doing research in Africa may easily get attention and resources, however they do not live there or speak all the local languages. They do not look like local people either, so it is difficult for them to blend into the local population. Their presence can sometimes even change local dynamics. Hence, they are outsiders, and that restricts the depth of their understanding. A colleague of mine once mentioned an interesting analogy. Imagine you are looking at a pond. You notice a fish that comes to the surface. Based on your observation, you have to analyze what is happening below the water. However, we have never been under the water. Thus, to some extent, being an outsider is a liability, as it limits the degree of what we can do. But that also does not mean that scholarship produced in this way fundamentally deviates from the reality. Recently, works produced by African scholars have drastically increased. It is interesting to see that these works have not led to a dramatically different way of approaching research. Meanwhile, it is also worth mentioning that very few people study Africa. During graduate school, when I told my professor that I wanted to work on Africa, the professor said it would be difficult for me to get a job. In fact, when I came to Pomona College, I was not hired to teach about Africa, but statistics. The College was not looking for someone to teach Africa. Whenever I am on sabbatical, the College always finds someone to replace me to teach statistics, but never tries to find someone to teach Africa. Thus, to some extent, in my sub-field, you have to choose between a certain degree of Eurocentrism and nothing-at-all.

What is the most important advice you could give to early practitioners and scholars of international relations?

Follow your heart. When I was doing research, people told me not to waste my time studying Mali, because the country is not important enough. But I studied it anyway. Likewise, if you are passionate about a topic but other people find it trivial, you should still go for it. You will become a good scholar and expand your knowledge to other fields. At some point, you may need to worry about the job market. But it is also important to live a fulfilling and meaningful life. Once you follow your passion, you can also try to be strategic. I study Africa and the related job opportunities are very limited. So I also start teaching economic development and statistics, which are helpful to my research on Africa.