

**Toward a Comparative Politics of Concepts and Categories  
Re-Imagining the State and Democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa:**

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This essay proposes that post-Cold War sub-Saharan African experience points to the importance of increased emphasis upon *comparatively, empirically grounded*, reconsideration of prevalent conceptualizations of democracy, the state, and their interrelationship.<sup>1</sup> It contends that bounded and uneven progress in accomplishing democratization and creating viable states in this long beleaguered region have been manifestations of problems far deeper than simply weak or errant political leadership amidst circumstances of comprehensive and seemingly endemic poverty. Rather, what has also been at issue, yet well below the intellectual radar screen in much of the pertinent literature, has been the adequacy of the conceptual lenses through which it has been conventional to examine and prescribe for these problems. Commentaries on democratization and the state in the post-Cold War era have generally and tacitly *presumed* the universal applicability of empirical theory still fashioned predominantly on the basis of western European and North American experience. Conversely, they have only rarely recognized or acknowledged that experiments and trajectories concerning the state and democracy in the very different circumstances of less developed nations, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, might yield insights meriting refinement or modification of received empirical political theory.

This essay starts from the premise that claims to universal applicability for empirical theory should be grounded in the experience and insights of *all* world regions. It suggests that in their unique and diverse circumstances, post-Cold War sub-Saharan Africa countries may indeed already have evolved empirical insights regarding the state, democracy, and their relationship that

rise to the level of theoretical significance. In recognizing more fully the contributions to theory of insights from very diverse cultures and regions, we may also come to appreciate more fully the extent to which the obstacles to achieving true democracy and viable states are ones we experience and struggle with in common to overcome.

## I

### **Toward A Comparative Politics of Concepts and Categories**

Susanne Hoerber Rudolph's American Political Science Association Presidential Address on the "Imperialism of Categories: Situating Knowledge in a Globalizing World" posed an issue that I believe is of surpassing importance to the profession of political science in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (2005). Will the discipline continue to presume that its prevalent conceptualizations of key political phenomena, still predominantly derived from the experience of the world's most powerful states, are universally valid? Stated differently, to what extent is the discipline prepared to assume that its working concepts properly supersede and, in effect, deny the reality and legitimacy of potential contributions to their formulation based on political wisdom evolved in myriad generally weaker and poorer local communities around the globe?

To the degree that the universalization of key political concepts and categories has continued to be insufficiently examined or subject to empirically driven modification, the field of comparative politics may have failed to live up to the implications of its name. For this subfield, as I have understood it, has been about the *comparative* study of differences as well as similarities across the divides of region, culture, political and socioeconomic circumstances such that *inductively derived* similarities across these divides contribute to the refinement of empirical theory.

From a policy perspective, the issue is in effect how far this subfield of the political science discipline is to permit its theoretical conceptualizations to counter the ideological presuppositions of the post-Cold War world's dominant powers, where its comparatively evolved findings diverge from them. Just how academic deliberations influence, and are influenced by, debates swirling within policy communities is itself a question that may merit more inquiry than it has received. That these interfaces exist and are important in both realms, however, is hardly to be doubted. So the question is, how far the comparative politics subfield is to foster independence from the imperialism of categories and effectiveness in speaking its truths to corresponding ideologically driven hegemonic behavior in foreign policy arenas. Equally important, the same question arises with respect to the manner in which the external "other" is incorporated in political cultures in what is an increasingly interconnected global village, albeit one at least as fractious and threatened by its fragmentation as it ever has been. In short, there is a clear potential for the "imperialism of categories" in the academy to parallel the ideological commitments of dominant powers, and the question is how far the subfield of comparative politics is prepared to question and challenge those tendencies where its empirical findings diverge from them

While Prof. Rudolph's address concentrated on the shortcomings of modernization theory, her clear implication was that these weaknesses nevertheless continue to haunt and weaken related but revised contemporary categories employed by students of comparative politics. She infers that patterns reflecting western experience tacitly underlie and define key contemporary political categories as they did those of modernization theory a generation ago. She warns of a corresponding serious risk that local knowledge of local realities will be ignored with corresponding deleterious effects on the validity of claims to universal applicability for our

received concepts and categories. Failure to consider local knowledge deprives one of an important perspective from which to gauge the pertinence of imported categories. Accordingly, there are *prima facie* grounds to be concerned that the academic community may reinforce widespread assumptions within policy communities based exclusively on western experience when these assumptions need to be challenged. In short, I believe there is evidence to support her inference, at least with respect to the subjects of the state and democracy in sub-Saharan Africa.

I want to suggest, therefore, that the appropriate counter to the continuing reliance upon an “imperialism of categories” is cultivation of a *comparative politics of concepts and categories*. What is required is not *only* continued energetic and fruitful comparisons of political institutions, processes, and behavior through received conceptual lenses and bases of categorization but also, comparatively and inductively grounded *reconsideration* of those concepts and categories themselves. The task at hand should be to work toward broadening the empirical foundations of key concepts and categories to more clearly reflect commonalities in the local experiences of countries in *all* world regions rather than primarily those of one or two world regions. The methodological difficulties in so doing are not to be underestimated, but I do not believe they need be insurmountable.

I do not think, however, that simply juxtaposing “local knowledge” with presumptively universal truths embedded in our working categories and definitions will allow the former to influence the latter to the extent and in the ways that are required. If local knowledge is only juxtaposed to what is claimed to be universal, it will only continue to be marginalized. Tacitly, it will continue to be treated as quaint but irrelevant. Subtle but potentially theoretically significant, incipient trajectories of sustainable change will be overlooked or ignored, e.g., in this case in respect of democratization, state strengthening, and their relationship in sub-Saharan Africa.

Empirical theory evolved from many rather than a relatively few local traditions may be expected to be more serviceable for both attentive audiences and involved policy makers in understanding the challenges of, and in formulating appropriate and sustainable initiatives for, advancing political reform in developing nations. In Aristotelian fashion, however, I also envision a comparative politics of concepts and categories that honors not just what *exists* in any given particular country circumstances but what is realistically *possible* given those unique parameters. Clearly, this implies stretching without diluting the normative content and uses of concepts and categories in comparative politics. The goal becomes to work toward normative underpinning of empirical theory that is more fully shared rather than externally imposed in developing countries that have been the objects of imperial superimposition of categories.

Those bodies of local knowledge are, of course, never “pure.” They reflect the product of “imperial” categories as they have been and continue to be received, challenged, and refashioned in local situations. In these interactions, the normative content of received categories need not be ignored. Over time, by incorporating more of what is common to more bodies of local knowledge, what have been conventionally claimed and tacitly assumed to be universal categories can become more truly so. In consequence, they will become more applicable and seem less alien and “imperial” in those myriad contexts. This comparative politics of categories will gradually cause local knowledge to *influence*, not just be juxtaposed to, what have been in effect “imperial” categories.

Fashioning a more intentional and energetic *comparative politics of concepts and categories* is, I hypothesize, at the heart of what is required in the project of re-examining difference and inequality in “developing nations.” The problem is not, I suggest, *only the facts* of differences between the worlds of mature and developing nations or their multifaceted, deepening

internal and external inequalities *per se*. Just as important are the *conceptual lenses* through which we have been accustomed to viewing, appraising, and prescribing for them. At one level, this distinction is by no means new or original, for it was impressed upon all of us when we first engaged this subfield of the discipline. I suggest, however, that a renewed concern for the depth and seeming intractability of multifaceted developing nation inequalities requires as a pre-condition another series of visits to the conceptual ophthalmologist. We need to explore in what ways it may be necessary to recalibrate the lenses we conventionally employ to understand and address the dimensions of difference within and among developing nations and between them and more mature polities.

A useful starting point for this inquiry is simply to pose the following question: what difference does difference make? The hypothesis of this essay is, in a word, potentially a great deal. I undertake to explore this thesis as it bears upon the subject of democracy, the state, and their relationships, with particular reference to sub-Saharan Africa. In the second section of this paper, I will suggest, first, that employment of presumptively *universalistic* conceptions both of democracy and democratization and of the state has obscured our sensitivity to the ways African countries' perform in realizing its requirements. A universalistic standard has obscured important differences among countries in the *local conceptions* of democracy as they have evolved in pursuing those requirements, local conceptions that appear to help significantly to *explain* very significant performance *differences* among these countries. This essay will center on local strategies and trajectories that appear important in explaining how and why some African countries have appeared to do significantly better than others in achieving democratization and state stability. Second, I will suggest that imposition of universalistic conceptions of the state as well as democracy has obscured the question of precisely how these two phenomena function in

relationship to each other empirically. I will suggest that implicitly varied local *answers* to that question have been important both empirically in *explaining* varied progress in state strengthening and democratization *and* in suggesting hypotheses about the relationships of state building and democratization that may *add* to or *amend* received theory. Third, this potential contribution to theory may entail yet another. In helping to elucidate the *relationship* between state making and democratization, local strategies may suggest intriguing refinements and distinctions in the presumptively universal meanings of both terms. For example, the temporal and logical relationships among the key components of democracy and the state, when they are simultaneously fragile and/or embryonic, as is rather distinctively the case in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa, may differ from when they are in their mature forms or are considered independently. Fourth, in the context of *developing* countries, a truly comparative politics of concepts and categories must necessarily incorporate historical perspectives and trajectories contained in local knowledge, enriching a field that has seemed preoccupied with the present tense in countries that nonetheless are still presumed to be “developing.”

I want to suggest that a comparative politics of concepts and categories is in fact required to diminish the risks our falling victim to theoretical equivalents of Type One and Type Two errors as surely these dangers have long been recognized to attend statistical analysis and interpretation. The risks are comparable and equally dangerous. These practices and their risks are sufficiently common and underexamined that recognition of their existence qualifies as counterintuitive.

By Type One error at the level of categories and concepts, I mean the practice of assuming commonalities between what is required for developed and developing nations where, in fact, greater accommodation of difference may be indicated. I refer to the practice of indulging

presumptions that received categories and concepts concerning the state and democracy are applicable *as they stand* to the circumstances of all developing countries, when they may require greater fine tuning to accommodate patterns of difference in the light of local developing country circumstances. Universally applicable empirical theoretical concepts of state and democracy may need to be grounded more in the experience of *all* world regions, not just on that of one or two of the most powerful world regions. In other words, the possibility of Type One error challenges the hypothesis, implicit in prevalent reliance on these concepts as they stand, that their presumed normative appropriateness counterbalances and compensates for the risk that they may distort, misperceive, or overlook significant aspects of empirical realities in the circumstances of given countries to which they are applied.

There are significant risks in committing Type One error. These include myopia with respect to (1) parameters governing the plight of struggling democracies and weak states, (2) important factors establishing varying trajectories among developing nations, and (3) the nature and significance of potentially creative and effective departures from patterns of state building and democratization ordained by existing empirical theory. The underlying risk of Type One error is that imposed *disallowing* of conceptual and categorical diversity, founded upon possibly theoretically significant local uniquenesses, will lead both to inadequate diagnoses of weak state, stalled democratization phenomena. It may entail failure to discern and encourage creative, apt, theoretically significant departures from, as well as confirmations of categories and concepts received from abroad. These departures may be unique to particular local circumstances or they may prove to reflect syntheses empirically derived from any number of local sets of circumstances and bodies of knowledge. Failure to appreciate legitimate and appropriate conceptual differences in developing nation struggles with stateness and democracy encourages

common presumption that practices in these regions reflect only (a) their incapacity to meet global standards, and/or (b) of intractable differences between the circumstances of less and more developed nations.

Type Two conceptual and categorical error involves this very tendency to presume intractable and/or ineradicable differences between developed and developing nations in their capacity to meet global standards in, say, democratization and stateness, when in fact greater appreciation of existential commonalities across these divides may in fact be indicated. There has been a tendency to overlook and implicitly disallow possible elements of commonality between not only the aspirations but also the *circumstances* of states and democracies as between more and less developed nations. Recognition of these commonalities may remain hidden and overwhelmed by the magnitude and complexity of manifest political as well as socioeconomic inequalities between the two realms. Anyone who has any familiarity with politically engaged actors in developing countries will be aware that fervent aspirations for democracy and stable states and issues and problems blocking their realization cross the divides of developed and developing nations. The practice of Type Two error allows apparent cross-cultural difference to obscure what are in what common aspirations, circumstances and struggles.

The “imperialism of categories” entails potential myopia with respect not only to the theoretical and empirical significance of differences and local knowledge abroad but also to flawed adherence at home to norms that are recommended abroad. Threadbare social capital and less than transparent governmental behavior, for example, have not been the monopolies of less developed countries. In a word, universalistically imposed concepts and categories of empirical theory tend to be applied normatively to judge developing country progress toward their realization while, at the same time, being less assiduously applied to appraise the state of politics

in imperial metropolises. Type Two error entails the risk of underestimating the extent to which flawed adherence to theory in the imperial metropole itself establishes more commonality with the circumstances of developing countries than it might be comfortable for some to acknowledge. At policy levels and in political cultures at home, the reality and merits of empirical commonalities in the struggles for effective states and meaningful democracy gets lost to the extent that Type Two error is committed. Understanding of commonalities in the human condition and of obligatory dimensions of interdependence may suffer as a result. All politics is local, as the late Speaker reminded us, and so in a sense is all political *knowledge*, that accumulated in powerful as well as less powerful country contexts. Commonalities across bodies of local knowledge and experience can usefully include more as well as less developed countries. Avoidance of Type Two error entails acceptance of the possibility that less developed and more mature nations do indeed suffer common fundamental challenges in realization of shared aspirations. .

## II

### **Re-Imagining the State and Democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa**

An important contention of this essay is that the “imperialism of categories” is alive and well in working conceptions of the state and of democracy as employed within the subfield of comparative politics and policymaking with respect to developing countries, at least in relation to sub-Saharan Africa. Chagrin and alarm, on the one hand, at the pervasiveness of state weakness, collapse and/or failure and, on the other hand, at the limited progress in democratization in sub-Saharan Africa has appeared generally to be in large measure attributable to this practice. Fundamentally, concepts of democracy and of the state that are presumed to be grounded in *empirical* theory have been employed as a *normative* standard for judging the progress of less

developed nations largely on the basis of the synthesized experience of mature democratic states. These benchmarks, established at the point where countries have come to regard themselves as developed, have been employed to gauge the quality of *processes* in countries that may or may not have been moving them toward these objectives. Specifically, this practice may tend to ignore rather than illuminate the important question of what might be the most appropriate *sequencing* of steps toward achieving democracy and viable states. As they have in the case of establish democratic states, these sequences may necessarily and appropriately vary with the circumstances in which each country finds itself. A proper comparative politics of concepts and categories might usefully extend more fully to comparisons of the processes and sequencing by which countries evolve their distinctive political contours.

To a large degree, this practice is inescapable in real politik terms. It is not entirely wrong since, in normative terms, it seems beyond question that there are core elements of what it means to be democratic and to be a state on which there would be/is nearly universal agreement. The problem comes in differentiating those truly *sine qua non* core elements truly from ones that are not. More importantly for purposes of this essay, it is important to inquire in what respects variations around common themes are legitimate theoretically as well as empirically as creative responses to particular local circumstances. The hypothesis of this essay is that appraisals of post-Cold War sub-Saharan African experience to date have been insufficiently attentive to sub-Saharan African variations on received common themes. These variations have reflected local knowledge and circumstances fashioned in several instances with the encouragement, active participation and/or significant assistance of external actors. Some of these variations have appeared, on the basis of preliminary evidence, to be important factors differentiating those countries that have been more successful to date in meeting standards based on received

definitions of state and democracy from those that have been less successful in these terms. In other words, there appear to have been significant instances in which practice has challenged theory, where local knowledge and circumstances have been fused with international influence via external actors to fashion variations that may speak to gaps in and/or represent important refinements of received theories. Modifying practice influenced by an “imperialism of categories” with more extensive practice of a “comparative politics of concepts and categories” promises to enrich theory as it expands the empirical foundations upon which empirical theory stands.

The balance of this section, first, reviews how sub-Saharan African countries have been judged by norms established on the basis of received empirical theory. Second, it offers tentative explanations for evident variations among sub-Saharan African nations in respect of those norms. The particular emphasis is upon some potentially theoretically significant variations on the common themes implicit in those norms that may explain the greater success of some countries in meeting them. The succeeding section offers a preliminary exploration of the importance of some of these variations for the literatures on empirical theory underlying the norms by which the experiences of individual sub-Saharan African countries have been judged.

**A. Judging sub-Saharan Africa’s States and Democracies.** Assessments of post-Cold War African democracy building progress have relied heavily upon quantitative operationalization of key elements of received empirical theory while assessments of the condition of African states have been more qualitative. Correspondingly, both the specification of essential elements and the discernment of differences in performance have been sharper with respect to democratic progress than with respect to the state. The limitations of quantitative data

in this area are acknowledged, counterbalanced by their utility as shorthand for purposes of a short essay.

With respect to the state, the prevailing assessment has been that African states generally have been woefully deficient and debilitated by pervasive neo-patrimonialism, as cause and/or effect of their general weakness, notwithstanding patterns of overbearing government.<sup>2</sup> In terms of the customarily implied Weberian concept of the state, sub-Saharan African states have lacked the capacity to monopolize the legitimate use of violence within their legally recognized territorial domains and, by extension, to cause their writs to run on all matters they undertake throughout these geographically defined jurisdictions (Weber 1947, 156). This weakness has been attributed, implicitly, to failure to uphold another Weberian model, that of bureaucratic probity, efficiency, and effectiveness: autonomous, transparent, rule-driven government by capable occupants of defined, specialized roles and offices (1947, 329-341).

Here is one important instance where the prevailing judgment of sub-Saharan African governance failings has glossed over a fundamental conceptual issue that may go to the heart of the Weberian models themselves. At first blush, the issue appears to be one anthropomorphic reductionism. While Weber's concept of bureaucratic government is framed in rigorously impersonal terms, his idea of the state has seemed to imply that states are created by would-be rulers who succeed in establishing and legitimizing territorially based compulsory associations. On further reflection, however, what may be involved in this seeming ambivalence is an implicit distinction between the idea of the state in formation and a state in its maturity. In the former, the exertions of the agent may tend to determine its contours more than settled rules and structure. In the latter, a state may be defined primarily by rules and structures at least tacitly accepted by those subject to them more in line with Weber's conception of bureaucracy, even if subjects lack the

power of citizens in a democracy to define and hold rulers accountable to them. In these terms, the anthropomorphic reductionism appears in a pronounced tendency in the comparative politics literature to conceive of the state as virtually indistinguishable from government by defining the state in terms of what we might consider to be its emergent rather than its mature form. One notable example of this general practice is a prominent and influential comparative politics text that offers that the state is “an organization controlling the people in a territorial jurisdiction.”<sup>3</sup> Nothing in this definition suggests settled rules or, by extension the rule of law, as a critical element of the state. Nothing of the Weberian ideal type bureaucracy is implicit in this definition.

The danger in failing to adhere to Stepan’s injunction that “the state must be considered as more something more than the ‘government.’” is that the idea of the state as no more than an organization of control does little to pinpoint what differentiates corrupt state forms from transparent ones (1978, xii). Moreover, it fails to parse the idea of “control.” What exactly is it that enables a would-be ruler to secure the acquiescence of his subjects to his rule, to legitimate his rule on some basis other than sheer force of arms? Again, in Weberian terms, how do any of the ideal-type forms of legitimacy come to be approximated and gain viability? Nothing in the above definition of the state as synonymous with control even acknowledges the importance of answers to this question.

Perhaps it is the very starkness and pervasiveness of generally unhappy post-independence African experience with the state that helps to account for a seeming obliviousness in much of the comparative politics literature to what one might think are obvious implications and contemporary applications of the received Weberian conceptions. This experience does seem to suggest that the performance of African states has merited harsh judgment in terms of the Weberian model. At the same time, however, one must point to implicitly insufficient

specification and differentiation, in these judgments, of the properties of a mature state in contradistinction those in formation. Post-independence African political experience has been replete with organizations, rulers, and elites of varied types, flying under varied ideological flags, who have undertaken to control peoples within their respective internationally ordained post-colonial territorial jurisdictions. The outcomes of these efforts have demonstrated with unmistakable clarity both that overbearing *governmental* organizations have indeed not been synonymous with what a mature *state* needs to be and that something more has been required for *states* to acquire strength and stability than just rulers and organizations bent on control.

The key question, of course, is what that “something” might be. Crawford Young’s magisterial and influential study of the African colonial state is instructive on this point (1994). Young concludes that African polities retain enough of the basic elements of states to qualify as such, notwithstanding their origins in colonial imposed structures whose essential features he notes have been perpetuated well into the post-colonial era. But the evident weakness, fragility and, in some cases, collapse of states suggests something more is indeed required than organizations and rulers bent on control. The subsequent sections will suggest that the literatures on post-conflict political reconstruction, and the records of those countries that appear to have made above average progress toward becoming democratic states, have contributed potentially important lessons in this regard. One such lesson has appeared to be that, at least in African circumstances, states need to be built from the ground up more than the prevalent contemporary interpretation of Weber’s conception seems to entertain. Another important lesson would appear to be that in the contemporary processes of state *formation* or *reconstruction* an element of consent introduced by democratic processes may be as important as that of coercion suggested by at least contemporary interpretation of Weber. A third lesson would appear to be that these

consent building processes need to center on establishing fundamental rules of the game as a foundation of the state on which the *rule* of law can then be based. This observation addresses a typically question overlooked in appeals for adherence to the rule of law: *whose* rule of law? It follows that in the processes of state formation, at least in some circumstances, elements of democracy may be as important to the viability of state as, in mature states, sustainability of democracy may rest on state stability. This may represent one fundamentally important instance in which local experience may have something to teach received theory concerning the requirements of state (re)formation and the focus of democratic processes, at least in the 21st Century and in some regional settings.

With respect to democracy, the heavily quantitatively influenced available evidence centers on electoral performance and observance of basic human rights. Four approaches to quantitative estimates of democratic progress will be summarized briefly. First, Freedom House estimates of respect for civil and political liberties have been especially influential.<sup>4</sup> Based on scales of 1 to 7 where 1s and 2s indicate freedom, 3s to 5s partial freedom, and 6s and 7s lack of freedom, African countries have made significant democratic progress since the end of the Cold War. Where African countries as a group registered an average score of 5.45 on political liberties and 4.96 on civil liberties in 1990, respectively, they averaged 4.47 and 4.15 in 2004. In other words, with respect to honoring individual liberties, African countries as a group have progressed from borderline partly free/unfree to solidly partially free.

**Table 1**  
**African Pacesetters on Democratic Liberties 2004**

	<u>Best Scores 2004</u>			<u>Most Improved Liberties 1990-2004</u>		
	Pol Liberties	Civil Liberties		Pol Lib.	Civil Lib.	Pol+Civ.Lib.
Mauritius	1.0	1.0	Cape Verde	+4.0	+4.0	8
Cape Verde	1.0	1.0	Ghana	+4.0	+3.0	7
South Africa	1.0	2.0	Mali	+4.0	+3.0	7
São Tomé	2.0	2.0	South Africa	+4.0	(+2.0)	6
Mali	2.0	2.0	Seychelles	+3.0	+3.0*	6

Namibia	2.0	(3.0)	São Tomé	+3.0	+3.0	6
Ghana	2.0	2.0	Benin	+4.0	(+2.0)	6
Lesotho	2.0	(3.0)	Lesotho	+4.0	(+2.0)	6
Botswana	2.0	2.0	Kenya	+3.0	+3.0	6
Senegal	2.0	(3.0)	Malawi	+3.0	(+2.0)	5
Benin	2.0	2.0	Mozambique	+3.0	(+2.0)	5
			Niger	+3.0	(+2.0)	5
			Liberia	(+2.0)	+3.0	5

Source: Freedom House <http://www.freedomhouse.org/ratings/index.htm>

In addition, Table 1 identifies those countries that have made significantly greater progress since 1990 in advancing protection of civil and political liberties than others in the region. These thirteen countries all improved by two points or more on both civil and political liberties and a total of five points overall, placing them a standard deviation or more above the average level of improvement of all African countries, roughly one point in each category and two points overall. Mauritius and Botswana have been acknowledged as pacesetters since their independence, but less well known are those that have joined the ranks of 1s and 2s since 1990, including not only South Africa but Namibia, Benin, Cape Verde, Lesotho Ghana, Mali, Sao Tome, and Senegal. Equally important, other countries have made marked positive strides during the 1990s and the first years of the new millennium though still falling within the partially free category: Malawi, Mozambique, Kenya, Niger, Liberia and Seychelles.

Second, the Polity Projects, have measured the net balance between institutionalized democratic practice and unrestrained authoritarian tendencies particularly as they relate to the executive branch.<sup>5</sup> Net balance scores range from +10 for fully democratic states to -10 for unalloyed authoritarian rule. Between 1990 and 2003, the Polity project records a strong average country net improvement for African states of 5.90 (-5.56 to +0.34). In 2003, 11 African countries joined long time democracies Botswana and Mauritius with scores of 6 or more, more than a standard deviation about the average for all countries in the region. As Table 2 indicates,

they included, in addition to South Africa, Lesotho, Senegal, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Ghana, Namibia, Malawi, and Benin. All these countries, except for Senegal, exceeded by more than a standard deviation the average of level of democratic *progress*, since 1990, recorded by the countries of the continent as a group.

**Table 2**  
**Democratic Institutionalization in Africa**  
**According to 2003 Polity Data**

Mauritius	10	Madagascar	7
South Africa	9	Malawi	7
Botswana	9	Mali	6
Lesotho	8	Mozambique	6
Senegal	8	Namibia	6
Kenya	8	Benin	6
Ghana	7		

Source: Polity IV Project: *Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions 1800-2003* <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/polity>

A third statistical gauge of African democratic progress examines democratic progress by estimating the strength of opportunities for exercising voice and accountability. The World Bank *Governance Matters* surveys also estimate governmental effectiveness, regulatory quality; and state stability (Kaufmann, et al. 2004). Its estimates of the strength of the rule of law can properly be regarded as applicable in all three areas. The Bank’s biennial surveys since 1996 have awarded normed scores to each country on each of these six subjects based on surveys that purport to tap broad cross sections of public opinion in each country. On all measures, the data unsurprisingly place African countries as a group below the average for all 171 countries included in the surveys. More strikingly, they also record actual relative *declines* in African country scores. They do so in all six categories from the first round through the fourth round of the surveys.

Nonetheless, eleven African countries in 2002 rated scores of a .33 standard deviation above the *world* mean in at least one of the six categories. Table 3 summarizes these data. The conceptual and methodological strengths and limitations of these data sets are of course, an open and important issue, albeit well beyond the scope of this essay. But they are suggestive of unexplained trajectories of relative progress that deserve more attention than they have received to date. The World Bank data add another dimension to this inquiry. They suggest the pertinence of connections between relatively strong performance on measures of democracy and comparable distinction with respect to both governmental performance and state stability: All of the countries on the abover average voice and accountability list were represented on at least one measure of state strength except Sao Tome which was not included in the surveys. More generally, with the exception of Tunisia, many of the same countries that emerge as leaders in the Freedom House and Polity Data appear among the relative leaders in the World Bank surveys. These findings may appear counterintuitie largely because of the influence of literatures suggesting that democratization is actually harmful to state stability and, by implication, governmental performance.<sup>6</sup> But, as section III will explore, this literature hinges upon generally unexamined assumptions concerning inevitable temporal priority given to elections in relationship to other elements of democracy such as constitutional reconstruction..

**Table 3**  
**Governance Matter Surveys: Countries Above Average in 2002**

<u>Voice</u>	<u>Stability</u>	<u>Gov't Effect.</u>	<u>Req. Qual</u>	<u>Rule of Law</u>	<u>Corruption</u>
Mauritius .80	Seychelles 1.06	Botswana .87	Botswana .81	Mauritius .89	Botswana .76
Botswana .73	Mauritius .91	Tunisia .65	S.Africa .60	Botswana .72	Mauritius .53
S. Africa..73	Cape Verde .81	Mauritius .53	Mauritius .46	Seychelles .52	Seychelles .52
Sao Tome .48	Botswana .75	S. Africa .52		Namibia .45	S.Africa .36
Cape Verde .41	Benin .63				Tunisia 35
Namibia .33	Sao Tome .56				Cape Verde .33
	Mozambique .55				
	Gambia .55				
	Namibia .46				

Source: D. Kaufmaan, A. Kraay, and M. Mastruzzi. 2004. *Governance Matters: Governance Indicators for 1996-2004*, World Bank: Washington, DC.  
<http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/governance/pubs/govmatters4.html>

A final set of quantitative indicators has been contributed by the Afro-Barometer surveys and the companion Latin American, European, and World Values surveys. A critical element in the strengthening of democracy is in embedding in political culture the idea that democracy is “the only game in town” (Linz and Stephan 1996). Afro-Barometer surveys in twelve countries have suggested that, on this question, African progress has been visible but limited. On the twin question of popular satisfaction with democracy and willingness to reject all alternatives to democracy, opinion was clearly divided as summarized in Table 4

**. Table 4**  
**Estimates of African Satisfaction with Democracy**

	<b>Prefer Democracy(%)</b>	<b>Satisfied with Democracy(%)</b>	<b>Reject Alternatives to Democracy(%)</b>
<b>Nigeria</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Botswana</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Zambia</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Tanzania</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>South Africa</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Ghana</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>n/a</b>
<b>Namibia</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Uganda</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Malawi</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Mali</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Zimbabwe</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Lesotho</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>34</b>

**Source:** <http://afrobarometer.org/TableAttitudesDemocracy>

The meanings of these findings would seem to be as elusive as they are intriguing. The unanswered questions include the depth of commitment these expressed opinions represent, the models of democracy in people's minds against which people offer these assessments, the kinds of reasons that underlie their opinions (e.g. 84% satisfaction with democracy in Nigeria) and demographic and other variables that may correlate strongly. Nonetheless, these data do suggest that democracy has had or acquired significant roots in African political cultures although they may not be as broad or as deep as they may need to be ultimately. Equally important for further inquiry are the explanations behind whatever statistically significant inter-country differences these data may reveal.

To conclude this section, Table 5 lists African countries making the list of pacesetters according to the each of the criteria identified in the preceding tables (1-3)

**Table 5**  
**Overall African Democratic Pacesetters**

	Liberties Best 2004 (Freedom House)	Improved Liberties	Exec Limits (Polity)	Voice & Accountability (Governance Matters)	Rule of Law	2003 PPP/ Cap (\$)#
Mauritius	x		x	x	x	11,280
Botswana	x		x	x	x	8,370
South Africa	x	x	x	x	x	10,130
Namibia	x		x	x		6,660
Benin	x	x	x			1,110
Ghana	x	x	x			2,190
Mali	x	x	x			960
Sao Tome	x	x	*	*	*	*
Senegal	x		x			1,620
Kenya		x	x			1,030
Liberia		x				*
Lesotho	x	x	x			3,100
Malawi		x	x			590
Mozambique,		x	x			1,060
Niger		x				830
Seychelles		x			x	*
Madagascar			x			800

Cape Verde	x	x	*	x	x	5,130
World Average						8,190

(\* not included in the Polity surveys) (# source: World Bank  
[www.worldbank.org/data/databytopic/GNIPC.pdf](http://www.worldbank.org/data/databytopic/GNIPC.pdf))

What are the important findings to be derived from the foregoing sets of data? First and foremost, a focus on differential performance with a concern to identify pacesetters points to what may, in some circles at least, seem to be counterintuitive realizations. First, African countries as a group have improved in the honoring civil and political liberties in their post Cold War democratization processes. Second, there have indeed been pace setters among these countries which tend to show up on several different measures of both democracy and, in some cases, of above average state stability. Third, with the exception of Liberia, there are no cases among these countries that have made progress in honoring democratic liberties as well as conducting multiparty elections of generally acceptable quality where they have degenerated into violence as a result of these steps. Contra Snyder and others, this is true even if the quality of their stateness has not improved in most cases (2000). Where serious violence has erupted, it is difficult to find more than perhaps one or two cases, out of nearly 50 continent wide, where violence has attended recognizable efforts to initiate democratic steps. Conversely, steps toward democracy have concluded rather than provoked violent domestic conflict, e.g. Namibia, South Africa, and Mozambique. Part of the counterintuitivity of these observations may result from recognizing patterns of general progress led by pacesetters that is often obscured by generalized pessimism about African democracy based on the examples of dramatic and widely publicized laggards in democratization and state stability. A larger point: operationally, the imperialism of categories yields judgments based on apriori concepts may tend to cloud sensitivity to local innovations suggesting contributions and refinement of those concepts, a point to be developed in the next section.

## **B. Toward Explanations of Pace-Setting African Democratic Performance**

What accounts for the records of these leaders and most improved performers? What explanatory factors, if any, do they share in common? Inattention to the implications of local initiatives in particular contexts would appear to bear much of the responsibility for a shortage of insights on this point to date. I suggest that the preceding data, while inconclusive, merit not only greater recognition of differences in levels of African democratic performance but also deeper inquiry into the explanations for what appear to be significantly better than average performance in building sustainable democracies and more viable states.

Blanket judgments on the causes of deficient African political performance by international standards have been far more plentiful than explanations for above average performance by some African countries in terms of these criteria, which have just been identified. No one factor appears to explain the performance of all of these the leaders, attesting the proposition that important local choices and trajectories in response to distinctive circumstances need not necessarily be universally applicable to be theoretically significant. Rather, they contribute to the generation of “if-then” propositions on the basis of which empirical theory may be more securely built if it is to accommodate properly the experiences of all world regions, not just principally one or two.

Among the important factors appear to ones related to demography, leadership, and country size. As students of Rousseau and the classical Greek philosophers might be led to expect, small size appears to be a factor (Mauritius, Cape Verde, Sao Tome, Lesotho and Benin). There has been a wealth of historical speculation on the importance of isolation by bodies of water in facilitating British and North American democracies. Might this factor also be important in the cases of the island entrees among the African leaders? Significantly, however, while some of the countries on the list of pacesetters in Table 5 have been significantly above average in per capita wealth, especially

for sub-Saharan Africa, most are at or below average. Pending further investigation, the GDP/capita data do not invite the hypothesis that socioeconomic variables appear likely to be key correlates of democratic *progress*. This is not to contest one of the most empirically well-grounded theoretical propositions in this literature, i.e., that higher levels of development correlate well with the *presence* of democracy. Rather it is to suggest that *prior* levels of wealth may not be a necessary prerequisite to the process of *building* democracy.

That capable leadership has been consistent with, and in some cases facilitative of, processes of democratization, including pre-election constitutional reconstruction, may appear counter intuitive given the association of assertive leadership with authoritarian rule and state weakening or worse in much of the continent and elsewhere. Clearly, however, it is important and necessary to distinguish qualities of capable from those of incompetent rule both generally and in relationship to the requirements of particular political challenges such as those of initiating and advancing democracy and state stability.

While it is well beyond the dimensions of this study to elaborate in depth on these points, it is apparent that individual leaders have played important roles in their countries with respect to these challenges. In general, these individual leaders have proven capable of preserving or enhancing broadly grounded state legitimacy rather than undermining it through corruption and excessive preoccupation with control and of either facilitating democracy or ruling in such a way as not to torpedo its future prospects. Such leadership qualities appear to have been in play in several of the countries appearing on the list of pacesetter democratizers that have also maintained state viability. The commitment to democracy of each of Botswana's post-independence presidents is a matter of record. Nelson Mandela and, in general, Thabo Mbeki in South Africa have clearly been important figures in keeping post-apartheid South Africa on a democratic path. In Senegal, Leopold Senghor

and his successors have been notable, inter alia for facilitating peaceful regime transitions in multiparty settings as well as for helping the country to sustain better than average democratic performance in other ways. Although his earlier leadership of Ghana was of a different stripe, Jerry Rawlings presided over Ghana's transition from authoritarian to more democratic rule during the decade of the 1990s. As a modernizer, but also one under considerable international pressure, Rawlings encouraged popular participation in the formation of a generally representative Consultative Assembly that prepared a constitution for the future democratic state that won approval in 1992. After serving two terms, Rawlings retired from his new role without requiring much publicly dissuasion from seeking a third term, unlike some of his contemporaries elsewhere in the continent. Finally, in Mali, a group of military officers joined with a Coordinating Committee of Democratic Associations to force formation of a transitional regime on the authoritarian Moussa Traore, leading to formation of a new constitution approved in 1992 and, *only then*, followed by national and local level elections (Harbeson, forthcoming). Without doubt, *fortuna*, in the form of the timely appearance of leadership with singularly requisite strengths has been an important factor in the emergence of post-Cold War African democratization pacesetters as has been the case elsewhere in other circumstances.

Less heralded, however, but of critical importance both in advancing democracy and in preserving or enhancing state viability, has been a distinctive *sequencing of democratization*. Most of the countries on the list of pacesetters—but not other countries in the region—have afforded temporal and logical priority for establishment of fundamental rules of the game prior to the conduct of initial national multiparty elections with the active participation of political parties, civil society, insurgent groups and/or the general public. In several, but not all cases, significant international involvement has also been an important facilitating element. By “fundamental rules of the game” I

am referring to pacts serving not just to facilitate transition elections but also to establish rules at a constitutional level governing the citizenry as a whole, not just the rival parties prior to, during, and for the foreseeable future *following* those elections. Thus, I differentiate the pacts that have been critical in the case of African pacesetters from those implied in Huntington's discussion of pacts in the context of Latin America and other regions. The pacts of which he wrote appeared generally to be of a breadth and depth sufficient only to persuade authoritarian regimes to endure competitive elections that, predictably, would lead to their replacement (Huntington 1991).

These trajectories of pacts of a constitutional nature, reinforced by strong public pressure, preceding initial national multiparty elections have appeared to be critically important explanatory factors in the case of Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Malawi, Benin, Ghana, Mali, and Lesotho. The critical point is that the countries in focus here are those which have done best both on civil and political liberties according to Freedom House estimates *and* Polity Project estimates of safeguards against the unrestrained exercise of executive power. And, in each case, their progress on the liberties considered centrally important in empirical democratic theory, at least since Robert Dahl's pathbreaking work, has been made *after* they established broad pacts including *inter alia* the constitutional safeguards on which the Polity Project has focused (1971; 1989). Intensive negotiations of constitutional nature established terms on the basis of which Namibia and South Africa consented not only to multi-party elections on the basis of universal suffrage but to the outlines of post-apartheid democratic governance. The accord enabling Frelimo and Renamo to end their civil war and proceed to unprecedented competitive multiparty elections was, indeed, an electoral accord but its terms were sufficiently detailed and comprehensive to establish the terms of their peace and post-election political competition with each other. A UN mediated, multiparty roundtable in Malawi, following a plebiscite ordaining party competition, fashioned broad

agreements on a broad range of legal and policy changes prior to the competitive national elections supplanting the authoritarian rule of Kamuzu Banda. Similarly, extensive constitutional negotiations preceded the competitive national elections that enabled Benin, Ghana, Lesotho and Mali to join the ranks of Africa's democracies, albeit with markedly less international participation. Kenya has followed by same pattern albeit by a different and more tortuous route. Donors collectively forced the authoritarian regime of Daniel arap Moi to change just one provision of the constitution to permit multiparty national elections, but nothing else. Subsequently, civil society groups supported eventually by dissident members of Moi's own party have succeeded after more than a decade in forcing a constitutional review process in the run-up to the 2002 elections. Their success in doing so has clearly been instrumental in Kenya's late entry into the list of pacesetters even if that constitutional review has yet to come to fruition as this is written. Thus, although the precise forms of these negotiations have varied from case to case, the common element appears to have been popularly supported negotiations on fundamental rules of the game for governing states constitutionally *prior* to elections (Harbeson 1999).

In each of these cases, agreements on fundamental, constitutional rules of the game prior to conducting initial or nearly unprecedented national multiparty elections have not been simply backroom deals brokering power relationships between governing and opposition elites, in which ordinary citizens have played no role or have been mere spectators. In the case of each of these agreements, negotiating party leaders have been under observably strong pressure from party faithful, civil society groups, and/or insurgent militias to reach agreements on terms for the structure and conduct of government acceptable citizens generally, and to these groups of followers in particular (Wood 2000). In this respect, these countries support and, indeed, may have helped to influence, a new study published by Freedom House. In this study, Adrian Karatnycky and Peter Ackerman

uphold the importance of non-violent civic resistance in establishing and sustaining new democracies, confirming and broadening the empirical basis of the Schmitter and O'Donnell findings of nearly two decades earlier—although not specifically focused on constitutional reconstruction (Karatnycky and Ackerman 2005).

As with the importance of “capable leadership,” it may seem counterintuitive to recognize the importance of disaggregating the elements of constructive from ineffective or even harmful external involvement in democratic transitions. Sustained involvement has been one differentiating criterion. External involvement in Ethiopia's transition from dictatorial military rule to something less than multiparty democracy was limited to a former U.S. assistant secretary of state's warning of “no democracy, no [future international] cooperation. Similarly, in Kenya, after donor countries collaborated in forcing constitutional change limited to permitting multiparty elections, external assistance played only a very limited role at best in helping to make transitional elections the foundation for full scale democratic development. By contrast, extensive and sustained external technical assistance, financial support, and diplomatic pressure was a common feature of pacesetting transitions in at least Mozambique, South Africa, Namibia, and Malawi, even if it may not have proven to be necessary in every case (e.g. Benin and Mali).

In short, many of the pacesetting democratizers by commonly employed quantitative indicators, in which initial competitive multiparty elections have been preceded by detailed, popularly mandated negotiations on fundamental rules of the game on the basis of which countries are to be governed during and following those elections. Sustained external financial and technical assistance has been instrumental in several of these cases. One task of further research along these lines is to discern what common circumstances, if any, may have joined these countries in such a way as to make their following of this trajectory apparently obligatory. One strong is candidate the prior

existence of strong, even insurgent, civil society pressure directed to achieving liberation from authoritarian rule.

Conversely, it is difficult to identify other countries in Africa that have shared elements of this trajectory but yet have not appeared among the ranks of the pacesetters. Ethiopia's process was famously truncated and incomplete; Eritrea's exemplary constitutional reform process has been blocked by President Issaias, and Zambia's was undermined by the attempted disqualification of its former president from further political contestation because of his alleged non-Zambian origins. Uganda's careful and systematic process of constitutional reform has been greatly influenced by President Museveni's singular strategy of imposing the guardianship over the political process by his National Resistance Movement and the banning of political parties from formal electoral participation. Only Congo-Brazzaville, among the other countries, would appear potentially to qualify as an exception to the rule that countries sharing the elements of this trajectory have not joined the ranks of pacesetters (Clark 2005).

This distinctive trajectory that appears to be shared by, and only by, pacesetting democratizers has appeared to be closely related to state stability. Notwithstanding the absence of all but three of the countries sharing this trajectory from the list of the relatively most stable states, all of the pacesetting democratizers have appeared to have gained or retained relative stability during their democratic transitions. With the exception of Liberia, none have descended into civil war. Indeed this trajectory appears to have helped restore stability in Lesotho, Benin, and Ghana as well as the countries of Southern Africa. It was clearly responsible for Mozambique's emergence from nearly unrelieved civil war dating from its independence and before. It was quite evidently crucial to successful transitions from apartheid in both South Africa and Namibia. It clearly contributed to the restoration of political stability in Mali and restored state legitimacy in Malawi.

In short, the common features of these trajectories appear to have contributed to significantly better than average progress in advancing democracy but at the same time a shoring up of state stability. Based upon the evidence principally of stable states, it has been conventional to assume that a stable state is a necessary precondition for the establishment of democracy. But the evidence just presented suggests, by contrast, that processes of state *strengthening or reconstruction* may benefit from the same processes that simultaneously appear to advance democracy, i.e. intensive negotiations on fundamental rules of the game involving political parties and civil society prior to conducting transitional multi-party elections. This hypothesis implies a possible refinement of the definitions of both state and democracy to accomplish recognition of a greater, and perhaps counterintuitive, theoretical interdependence between them than has generally been recognized to date. The rule of law may not be simply a function of a ruler's de facto success in monopolizing the legitimate use of force as suggested by Weber and, in his *Coercion and Capital*, by Tilly (1990). Rather, at least in the circumstances of new democracies and fragile states, the rule of law may be the product of closely intertwined processes of democratization and state building, of the joining of coercion and consent in ways that imply rearranging the relative importance of the critical elements of both. Formation of rules of the game acquires an enhanced role, temporally and logically, vis-à-vis both elections in the conceptualization of democracy and the emphasis upon coercion in state theory.

### III

#### **Re-Imagining the State and Democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa**

The hypothesis of this essay has been that locally fashioned democratization trajectories have been important not only to relatively strong democratic performance in those countries but also potentially to the refinement, even the advancement, of theory with respect to democracy, the state, and their relationship. Notwithstanding participation by external actors, local circumstances appear

to have shaped democratization trajectories in ways that deserve influence upon concepts and theories whose presumption to universal applicability still rests predominantly upon the experience of the one or two most politically mature world regions. At the same time, this evidence suggests that features that may prove to be common to many local strategies and trajectories, generally overlooked by contemporary empirical democratic theory, may suggest significant refinements of that theory.

Specifically, the practices of pacesetter sub-Saharan African democracies would appear to represent locally generated contributions that empirical democratic theory should take into account in at least four areas. First, participatory establishment of fundamental rules of the game can be both logically and temporally prior to conducting transitional multiparty national elections, notwithstanding the implicit working presumption of much of the contemporary literature. Thomas Carothers' message in his essay on "The End of the Transition Paradigm" in many ways states a point similar to that of Susanne Rudolph in her presidential address (2002). Carothers' observation that the teleological presumption of recent democratization literature threatens its empirical validity is indeed reminiscent of the story of modernization theory in its heyday. However, his prescription for this malady seems to perpetuate the electoral focus of the paradigm he criticizes, notwithstanding widespread recognition that elections ipso facto democracies do not make. Similarly, recent literature on "electoral authoritarianism," observes, and indeed seems to *assume*, an uneasy coexistence between electoral democracy and persistent patterns of authoritarian rule found so pervasively in many Third Wave countries. This literature, however, also retains implicitly the presumption that elections are the central, and possibly the only, passport to democracy, with all other activities in support of democracy centered on that process, notwithstanding common recognition of that doctrine's implausibility.<sup>7</sup> The preliminary evidence from sub-Saharan Africa presented in this essay, invites a fresh examination of these influential contemporary theses, if for no other reason than

because of their persisting reliance upon the commonly rejected presumption that elections are the necessary and sufficient first steps to democratization.<sup>8</sup> One outcome of these inquiries might be a less pessimistic appraisal of the condition and prospects for Third Wave democracies, including those of sub-Saharan Africa

Second, the African evidence presented in this essay suggests that civil society is a universal concept susceptible to local meanings and formations that may prove to be critically important to the establishment or revision of fundamental rules of the game, notwithstanding a contrary presumption in some contemporary literature. The importance of civil society has been devalued in both some contemporary academic literature and in some influential more policy-centered literature. At root these literatures appear to practice, or attribute to others, a form of reductionism in which civil society is presumed to be synonymous with the existence of certain types of non-governmental organizations familiar in western democracies. Facilitating this indulgence in Type Two error, described earlier, has been apparent preoccupation with the unsurprising effort of western bilateral donors such as the U.S. Agency for International Development to promote just such western style NGOs! Civil society's importance has then been devalued, because it has been represented as excluding societal formations in Africa and elsewhere that should be included within the more general meaning in the term (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). It has been dismissed because in those western forms these NGOs have tended to be weak and donor dependent in these settings (Carothers and Ottaway 2000; Kasfir 1998).

A corollary of this Type 2 reduction is an implicit rejection of civil society as a vehicle for achieving accountable governance independently of, as well as in conjunction with elections, once again perpetuating the tired and discredited myth that democratization stands or falls on elections alone (Schedler). By contrast, O'Donnell and Schmitter were correct two decades ago in postulating

the centrality of a civil society “moment” in the accomplishing democratization, although this early groundbreaking work centered civil society’s moment on elections as the first priority, not the fundamental rules of the game. It spoke of pacts implicitly as agreements to allow elections to go forward rather than more comprehensive and intensive constitutional negotiations (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986).

Lost in this reductionism, however, has been the idea of civil society as synonymous with a fundamental constitutional level societal *process* of seeking to define, accomplish, and sustain accountable governance as articulated in the classic literatures of liberal political philosophy. By retaining a focus on this central overarching conception of civil society, organizations of many stripes in diverse local settings may be recognized as part of civil society to the extent that they play this role. It is in this way that civil society gains both universal applicability while remaining susceptible to being “domesticated by the local.”<sup>9</sup>

Third, the examples sub-Saharan African democratization pacesetters suggests the importance of democratic participation as an important element in (re)construction of fundamental rules of the game upon which state stability depends. This represents an alternative and/or complement to the customary presumption that the state is always and necessarily a product of successfully imposed coercion (Harbeson 1999). Some of the literature of empirical democratic theory is rather striking for its vagueness concerning where the institutions come from upon which both the state and democracy are clearly dependent, if they are not synonymous with them. Charles Tilly’s influential work on the formation of western European states seems to suggest that institutions are the creations of the rulers alone who form states (1975; 1992). Yet, implicitly, an element of consent is implied but unacknowledged in his own account of the formation of states.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in the literature of empirical democratic theory, Robert Dahl’s authoritative treatment conceives democracy to be

dependent upon the existence of “institutions of society” for its realization, yet he tells us very little about how these institutions come to be formed (1971; 1989). The trajectories of sub-Saharan Africa’s democratization pacesetters suggest that democratic participatory processes can themselves be crucial in the formation of these institutions. In this way, these same African trajectories trace how the processes of democratization and state formation/strengthening may be linked and mutually interdependent in ways that theories of both subjects independently have left quite underspecified..

Fourth, it follows from the foregoing observations that democratization can be as central to state (re)construction as a stable state may be to sustainable, healthy democracy. The examples of African pace setters suggest this hypothesis, notwithstanding the working if normally tacit presumption in the relevant literatures that only one half of this proposition is indeed true, i.e., that democracy is dependent upon a pre-existing stable state (Linz and Stephan, 1996). Here is an instance where the rather singular circumstance in sub-Saharan Africa of the juxtaposition of embryonic democracies and weak states may have provided local, empirical foundations for an important contribution to empirical theory.

These propositions manifestly do not change theory on the basis of one regionally defined set of cases. What they do suggest, however, is the importance of relating empirical theory more closely to a comparative study of concepts and categories, thereby rendering theory more open to the influence of innovative and existentially effective variations on received common themes. In a word, the imperialism of categories needs to yield to empirical theory that is, well, more empirically grounded and sensitized to significant strategies and trajectories in local circumstances. Greater attention needs to be paid to *difference*, both by recognizing the potential theoretical and policy importance of innovations grounded in local circumstances and, also, by discerning when differences are only apparent and serve to conceal important elements of common aspirations across

cultural divides. Attentiveness to difference in these ways is a key to a more robust comparative politics on the basis of which more truly universally applicable theory can be built on the foundation of the experiences of all world regions.

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Robert Fatton, Susanne Rudolph, and Lloyd Rudolph for their comments on an earlier version of this essay. The shortcomings that remain are my responsibility alone.

<sup>2</sup> One of the early and representative discussions of neo-patrimonialism in African contexts in relation to democratization was Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Kopstein and Mark Lichbach (eds), *Comparative Politics: Interests, Identities, and Institutions in a Changing Global Order* (Cambridge, UK; Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.14 A notable if infrequent contrast to this perspective is provided by Alfred Stepan, *State and Society: Peru in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978) p. xii

<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/ratings/index.htm>. There has been a widening discussion on the comparative merits of Freedom House, Polity and World Bank methodologies which it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore.

<sup>5</sup> Monty G Marshall and Keith Jagers, *The Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions 1800-2003*. While discussions of the Polity IV data and its predecessors, Polity I, II, and III have appeared in numerous articles, a useful summary of the project is found online at <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/polity>. Three small African countries have not been included in the Polity studies: Seychelles, Cape Verde, and Sao Tome-Principe. Comparisons between 1990 and 2003 are not available for four countries of because extreme state weakness or prolonged civil war: Burundi, Somalia, Cote d' Ivoire and Liberia.

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<sup>6</sup> This argument reflects an imprecise reading of literature such as Jack L. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (London, UK: Norton, 2000). The subtitle notwithstanding, Snyder's focus is actually upon elections undertaken prior to other elements of democratization that, along with economic development, he concludes must be in place first.

<sup>7</sup> The more recent literature includes: Levitsky, Steven and Lucan Way. 2002 "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism." *Journal of Democracy* 2: 51-66 and Andreas Schedler. 2002. "The Menu of Manipulation." *Journal of Democracy* 2: 21-36. See also, however, Terry Lynne Karl. 1995. "The Hybrid Regimes of Central America." *Journal of Democracy* 6(3): 72-87; Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway, eds. 2000. *Funding Virtue: Civil Society and Democracy Promotion* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, DC.; Nelson Kasfir, ed. 1998. *Civil Society and Democracy in Africa: Critical Perspectives*. Frank Cass: Portland; Case, William. 1996. "Can the Halfway House Stand: Semidemocracy and Elite Theory in Three Southeast Asian Countries" *Comparative Politics* 28(2): 437-464; Joseph, Richard. 1998. "Africa 1990-1997: From Abertura to Closure." *Journal of Democracy* 2: 3-17.

<sup>8</sup> None of this is to suggest that democratic elections may serve useful purposes for purposes other than the advancement of democracy, e.g., giving international a convenience benchmark for terminating their assistance, as in the cases of Ethiopia and Kenya discussed *infra*. See essay by Valerie Bunce in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> I'm indebted to Robert Fatton for this felicitous phrase communicated in written commentary on an earlier draft of this essay.

<sup>10</sup> I have explored this implicit element of consent in Tilly most recently in my paper on "Resurrecting Political Community: Democratization and the State in Sub-Saharan Africa," American Political Science Association annual meetings, September 2003