

**Political Studies of Agricultural Policy Processes in Africa, 1975-2005:  
Review, Critique and Recommendations**

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*Abstract:*

Persistent rural poverty and agricultural stagnation in Africa are commonly attributed to problematic policy processes. While past influential approaches to understanding the politics of African agricultural policies – namely neo-Marxist, urban bias, neopatrimonialism, and developmental states – have each made important contributions, they also suffer from significant shortcomings. This paper identifies eight particularly important areas that have been neglected, and concludes that ‘bringing politics back in’ to the study of African agricultural policy will require not only more and different research, but also social change.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Problematic agricultural policies in Africa constitute one of the most frequently cited reasons for continuing levels of high aggregate rural poverty in the continent [*Lofchie, 1989; Sachs and Warner, 1998; Collier and Gunning, 1999; Binswanger and Townsend, 2001*]. In addition, much blame of course rests with ‘external’ conditions (such as dumping, trade barriers, donor conditionality, destabilizing Cold War conflicts, and volatile and declining commodity prices), as well as with locally varying patterns of patriarchy and economic inequality. Nonetheless, many scholars and aid staff contend that policy analysis, decisions and implementation by many African governments have been inimical to the needs and interests of the vast majority of their poor citizens. Efforts to reverse agricultural decline by ‘getting prices right’ through structural adjustment and ‘getting institutions right’ through subsequent governance projects have been seen to be derailed by ‘neopatrimonial’ politics [*van de Walle, 2001; Harrison, 2005*]. Policy processes have thus come to the fore in renewed global attention about hunger, poverty and agriculture in rural Africa [*Scoones et al., 2005*]. Yet there are important uncertainties about agricultural politics in Africa. Are theories of urban bias still valid? How widespread are neopatrimonial politics? Can and should African states become ‘developmental’? Which lessons of structuralist theories of states in capitalism are still relevant today? Are there any important themes and experiences that have not received sufficient attention? This article addresses these questions by examining four major influential perspectives on African agricultural politics, and identifies some of their main contributions and limitations.

Beyond the sheer fact of altogether inexcusable levels of food insecurity, re-evaluating political studies of African agricultural policy is important and relevant for a

number of reasons. Such studies shed light on classic questions of political economy, such as what roles does agriculture play in capitalist transformations and industrialization? There are also new relevant issues, such as attempts to ‘upstream’ participation and deliberative democracy from particular projects into everyday policymaking [*Brock and McGee, 2002*]. In addition, agricultural politics have received increased attention with a broader shift emphasizing ‘results oriented’ research. Analysts have sought to understanding political constraints and opportunities partly in order to better monitor and evaluate the impacts of research on policy, something that is increasingly required by donors in an ever more competitive research environment [*Ryan and Garrett, 2003; Court and Maxwell, 2005*]. Rethinking political studies of African agricultural policy can also provide a mirror for Western research practice, revealing how some analysts have sought to ‘test’ in Africa political theories and research methodologies largely developed in the West. Addressing agricultural politics also helps reveal the inadequacy of neoclassical economics that appear increasingly unable to explain continued levels of significant hunger and rural poverty in a world of unprecedented wealth. Finally, examining agricultural politics is also needed given the resurgence of grand reports on African agriculture that are highly focused on production technology [*InterAcademy Council, 2004; IAASTD, 2005; DfID, 2005; UN Millennium Project, 2005*].

Perhaps the most important reason why an evaluation is warranted is because existing political analyses often shape views of what the particular problems are with policy processes in Africa, and consequently which solutions are prescribed. Most common explanations of poor African agricultural policy processes allude to weaknesses in analysis, decision making, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Political analysis explains these superficial weaknesses in turn as rooted in underlying problems of distorting ideology (statist, patrimonial, ethnic, or neoliberal), politically powerful urban groups, corruption and

clentialism, and weak government capacity. Consequently, prescribed solutions to remedy these problems include building capacity, reforming administrations, democratising, increasing funding, and conditioning aid. Yet over the past two decades, each of these suggested solutions have not produced intended results. In some cases the prescriptions were not implemented fully or effectively, but where they were implemented, they often did not meet their objectives (of course donor conditionality is also itself problematic, as is the fragmenting effects of uncoordinated foreign aid) [*Baylies, 1995; Olowu, 1999; Hirschmann, 1999; Straub and Anderson, 1999; Devarajan et al., 2001; van de Walle, 2001; Gibson, 2002; Holmes and Evans, 2003; Kane and Eicher, 2004; World Bank, 2005*]. Thus, the difficulties experienced by NGOs, donors, governments and farmers in achieving ‘pro-poor’ agricultural policies calls for a rethinking of the political theories that underpin prevailing understandings of agricultural policy processes.

Before continuing on to examine the four key approaches to African agricultural politics, a note of caution is due. This essay is a broad review; it briefly covers several major schools of thought over the past three decades, each with dozens, if not hundreds of studies to their names. A short stock-taking paper such as the current one inevitably must be somewhat abstract and presume some prior familiarity with the approaches and studies reviewed. That said, the following analysis does offer new and different lenses that can aid in reading these influential past approaches for the first time, as well as for repeated readings.

## II. POLITICAL THEORIES OF AFRICAN AGRICULTURAL POLICY

In the following analysis, I discuss several political concepts, roughly in chronological order, and how they have been applied to the study of African agricultural policy. The concepts are neo-Marxist, urban bias, neopatrimonialism, and the developmental state. Each perspective

also proposes, implicitly or explicitly, specific solutions. Each of these concepts have contributed to our understanding, but they also have methodological, empirical, and theoretical errors and omissions (some shared, some unique). In addition, I also discuss the contexts and people involved in these perspectives. Final sub-sections draw together the lessons from these perspectives, and point to new avenues for inquiry.

While I am drawing from self-described political analyses, readers should remember the great feminist recognition that ‘the personal is political’, and therefore interdisciplinary analysis beyond the state is also crucial to an accurate study of politics – a point to which I will return later. The limited scope of this essay however will focus on those major paradigms emanating from the disciplines of politics and political science explicitly focused on the state, rather than the many important ‘political’ insights from geography [*Goodman and Watts, 1997*], anthropology [*Berry, 1993*], gender studies [*Bryceson, 1995*]; history [*Wilks, 1993*], science studies [*Leach and Mearns, 1996*], economics [*Eicher and Staatz, 1998; Jayne et al., 2002*], political ecology [*Peet and Watts, 2004*], and so on (though of course disciplinary boundaries often overlap). A short article such as this cannot be comprehensive, and there are inevitably areas and nuances that I have not touched upon. For example, I will not address new institutional economic theories of the state and politics in Africa and agriculture, largely because they share similar economic methodologies as urban bias, and otherwise focus on normative analyses of what states ought to do [*cf. Firmin-Sellers, 1996; Dorward et al., 1998; Dorward et al., 2005*]. Despite such confines of this essay, I nonetheless do think focused stock-taking exercises can be useful and important [*see also, for example, Berry, 1984; Isaacman, 1993, among others*].

## *Neo-Marxism*

A key explanation of agricultural policy in the 1970s and early 1980s came from a structural neo-Marxist reading of the state [*Poulantzas, 1973*], arising out of a broader vein of dependency theory. The state was seen as an instrument of capital, functioning to help extract surplus from peasants. Analysts debated whether the state was controlled more by national or international bourgeoisie, particularly in Kenya [*see Kitching, 1985 for an overview*]. Prominent issues studied included cash crop plantations, land allocations, contract farming schemes, and taxes and subsidies [*Bernstein, 1981; Heyer et al., 1981*].

A common, underlying proposition of these approaches was that a democratic, socialist state would provide much greater prospects for agriculture and food security. However, opinion differed as to whether this was possible within an otherwise capitalist global system, the best and most likely means to effect this transformation, and whether it was necessary (or inevitable) to first pass through a capitalist stage in which agriculture would be ‘modernised’, and the multiple, uneven forms such a transformation could take [*Bernstein, 1990*].

Neo-Marxists’ perspectives on the state usefully highlighted the importance of international firms in African agriculture and thus stood in contrast to out-dated portrayals of African peasants as isolated and subsistence-based. It also drew attention to issues of corruption between the state and local and international businesses. Methodologically, such studies were often admirably based on in-depth fieldwork, and situated their particular studies in a historical, comparative perspective. Another contribution was the emphasis on the use of violence by the state in enforcing either removals or in repressing protests [*Konings, 1986; Little and Watts, 1994*]. Many studies also highlighted significant rural differentiation. Although some analyses became bogged down in classifying Africa into one mode of

production or another, or some mechanistic combination of modes, numerous studies also shed light on local agency by analysing how the international capitalist dynamics were complexly reconfigured through specific social, economic, political and cultural relations [Mafeje, 1981; Watts, 1983].

However, this approach also had several limitations. Firstly, it tended to be functionalist in assuming, rather than proving, that states served the interests of capital. Secondly, and related to the first, although internal contradictions were sometimes noted, it generally failed to sufficiently disaggregate the state, though some, such as Bernstein (1981) recognized the state as contradictory 'ensemble of apparatuses and practices' (56). In addition, the approach tended to downplay or ignore those (largely less favourable agricultural) areas and people that were not so proximate to relatively large concentrations of capital.

Neo-Marxist state theories arose in a progressive, post-independence era in which it was all too quickly becoming apparent that many national elites saw the state as an instrument for their own accumulation. The theories came to be associated primarily with left-leaning academics and the struggle for socialist development. Key centres included Tanzania's University of Dar Es Salaam, the London-based School of Oriental and African Studies, the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala, and the African Studies Centre in Leiden. By the 1980s, the state and capital approach saw reductions in its funding, research, publications, and influence as the neoliberal 'counter-revolution' [Toye, 1987] took hold through structural adjustment, though many analysts continue to make important contributions.

## *Urban Bias*

Robert Bates' (1981) model of urban bias suggested that African agricultural policy was shaped to meet the demands of powerful urban constituents rather than politically weaker rural citizens.<sup>1</sup> Bates explicit aim was to "deepen" Michael Lipton's (1976) influential and controversial work on urban bias, and "extend" it to Africa (Bates 1981: 7). He argued that marketing boards were used to tax export crops and keep the prices of food crops low, so that urban consumers would have cheap food and access to projects and services. Such policies hurt peasants, but peasants did not protest effectively because they were too dispersed, lacked sufficient communication, had alternative options, were selectively bought off with patronage, and could be violently repressed. In contrast, urban constituents were concentrated in a small area and could quickly mobilise large groups to make political demands and threatening protests. Such a dynamic, Bates argued, contained the seed of its own destruction, however. As peasants stopped growing and selling key crops, the economy and government revenue declined, and consequently rulers were unable to control political protest or retain legitimacy.

This model has been remarkably influential. Since its publication in 1981, Bates' book has been cited over 500 times in academic journals alone.<sup>2</sup> Persuasive in its tidy story line, it was presented in a succinct, highly accessible form. Bates' analysis has been influential methodologically as a prominent early empirical application of rational choice theory [Geddes, 2003; Brady and Collier, 2004]. It coincided with the World Bank's significant 'Berg report', *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa* [World Bank, 1981], and the two became frequently cited in diagnoses of Africa's agricultural and food security problems, despite Bates' (1981: 8) careful qualification that his arguments were 'advanced as hypotheses; though boldly stated, they are not proven'. With the success of his

approach, Bates published widely and transferred to Duke and then Harvard, and his work has continued to influence Washington staff and officials of United States Agency for International Development [e.g. *Bates, 1983*] and the World Bank, for whom the issue of urban bias became a common refrain [*Ahmed and Rustagi, 1987; Vyas and Casley, 1988; Jaeger, 1991; 1992; World Bank, 1994; Ng and Yeats, 1996; Donovan, 1996; Townsend, 1999*]. It sparked several critical compilations [*Moore, 1984b; Varshney, 1993*], but also helped spawn major research projects by the World Bank and the International Food Policy Research Institute on ‘the bias against agriculture’ [*Krueger et al., 1991; Bates and Krueger, 1993; Bautista and Valdés, 1993; cf. Karshenas, 1996/7*], though only four African countries were included (Zambia, Zaire, Ghana and Nigeria). More than simply an intellectual attraction, Bates’ ideas were incorporated, implicitly and explicitly, into many significant international development policies and projects. With the argument of an intrinsically weak peasantry unable to defend its interests, donors were able to use debt crises to impose structural adjustment programs in the name of the poor. As Lofchie (1989: 58) noted, ‘The widely shared consensus that urban political pressures are at the root of the problem of agricultural policy in modern Africa has disturbing implications: It suggests that it may be difficult to create a social coalition that would facilitate reform of this key policy’. In other words, since African farmers were too weak to speak for themselves, the leverage of benevolent outsiders was required to reform state intervention. Indeed, Bates (1986) is silent on farmers’ organisations, but emphasises the important role to be played by ‘technocrats’ in policy reform. Consequently, few farmers were ever actually involved in the formation of structural adjustment programs [*Bratton and Bingen, 1994*], and remain poorly involved in design of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers [*McGee et al., 2002*].

In retrospect, the urban bias literature contributed a number of important and original insights. Bates’ deductive, materialist ‘political economy’ challenged both orthodox neo-

classical economics and culturalist approaches to African politics. It emphasised a sort of inter-disciplinary analysis, and sought to investigate policy making as well as state-society interaction in an era in which the state was dismissively reified and castigated – on the left as an agent of capital, or on the right as an impediment to markets. It emphasised urban and rural political power, and states' responses. It also examined variable outcomes, such as when agrarian elites held power and implemented more favourable agricultural policies.

There are however also several key omissions and errors in Bates' urban bias model of African agricultural politics, many of which were in fact presaged quite clearly in Byres' (1969; 1974; 1979) and others' critiques of Lipton's work (see Lipton 1984) – critiques that Bates (1981) ignored for some reason. To his great credit, Bates (1991; 1993a, b) has come to recognise some limitations of his initial analysis, though his retractions and modifications are incomplete and unfortunately not cited anywhere near as often as the original argument. Some problems derive from his use of an early neoclassical version of rational choice theory [*Green and Shapiro, 1994*], which among other things ignored important issues of transaction costs, imperfect information, and the consequent rationale for public intervention in agricultural development (particularly in infrastructure and technology) [*Dorward et al., 2005*], as well as the social character of 'real' markets [*Harriss-White, 1999*]. A close reading also reveals unresolved tensions between government administrators self-sacrificing commitment to 'public spiritedness' (pp. 96-7), described in flowery language, and the hard-edge rational choice framework based on the assumption, as Moore (1987: 10) notes, that 'the sole objectives of political action are individual material gain and that individuals are rational in the pursuit of this objective'.

Bates' analysis also draws selectively on histories and theories of social movements in Africa [*cf. Crummey, 1986; Isaacman, 1993*]. Consequently, the book ignores important collective action problems of urban interests [*Wiseman, 1986; Bienen and Gersovitz, 1986*],

and provides a shallow treatment of rural socio-political structures that too crudely dichotomises rich and ‘non-rich’ farmers (gender, for example, is hardly mentioned). In addition, he treats peasants as full-time farmers rather than as possibly straddling urban-rural divides, as emphasized by recent livelihoods analyses [Scoones, 1998]. This error may in turn be due to the fact that, as Stein and Wilson (1993: 1046) note, ‘Despite his rhetorical commitment to the individual level of analysis Bates focuses almost exclusively on interest groups and elites’. Additionally, though Bates devotes a few pages at the end of his book to possible variations (pp. 122-5), he otherwise uses stylised facts [Peters, 1993; Stein and Wilson III, 1993: 1048] and largely ignores the vast diversity between countries (including those experiencing armed conflict) and, within a given country between crop agriculture and forestry, fishing, and wildlife. His analyses, as he rightly admits [Bates, 1993a: 1080] ‘do not highlight variation’ and ‘make too much of Africa to appear the same’. There are also significant questions about selection bias – as the case studies in the work consist largely of English-speaking former British colonies of Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Nigeria and Zambia (though occasionally Senegal and Ivory Coast). He also downplays distinctions between different state types (democratic, quasi-democratic, authoritarian, military, ‘failed’, and so on) and ideologies (socialist or capitalist). And the focus is on centralised administration and neglects the dynamics of local governments and traditional authorities. In view of the ‘Third Wave’ of democratization in African in the early 1990s [Bratton and van de Walle, 1997], he was perhaps premature to dismiss electoral politics (pp. 106-8), and his two passing mentions of violent coercion (pp. 81, 107-8) do not seem adequate in the face of persistent conflict [Le Billon, 2000]. His version of urban bias over-emphasises taxes relative to non-price sources of urban bias (for example, expenditure on education, health, roads). Finally, he also fails to sufficiently acknowledge the role of donors in shaping past policies [Harriss, 1979; Armstrong, 1987; World Bank, 1988a; World Bank, 1988b; Nindi, 1990].

## *Neopatrimonialism*

The essential concept of neopatrimonialism is that of a hybrid regime consisting of, on the one hand, an exterior modern, formal rational-legal state, and, on the other hand, a patronage system or spoils network in which a highly centralised administration obtains political support by pilfering state resources to distribute jobs, rent-seeking opportunities, and resources through personalised relationships to clients. This literature began in the 1970s and 1980s from a combination of American political science and Francophone research (the latter particularly centred around the Centre d'étude d'Afrique noire at the École de Bordeaux and the journal *Politique africaine*) [Lemarchand, 1972; Eisenstadt, 1973; Médard, 1982]. Thinking on neopatrimonialism has since been updated to incorporate the issue of partial reform during structural adjustment, democratic transitions, and the roles of donors in sustaining neopatrimonial regimes [van de Walle, 2001]. Though there are important differences amongst neopatrimonial regimes and in thinking on neopatrimonialism [Bratton and van de Walle, 1994; Chabal and Daloz, 1999; Bayart et al., 1999], the features I have outlined above are generally commonly held.

It has also been suggested that this concept helps explain the partial reform of agricultural sectors in sub-Saharan Africa [Bird et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2004; Cromwell and Chintedza, 2005]. Food and agricultural policies and projects, such an argument goes, have been actually devised according to neopatrimonial logic, rather than to proclaimed food security or poverty reduction objectives. Land, fertiliser and seed inputs, credit, price subsidies, and trading licenses are said to be privately appropriated and/or distributed to selected clients in order to garner political support.

The literature on neopatrimonialism makes a number of very important contributions to our understanding of Africa and development. Firstly, it contributes an appreciation of political dynamics, rather than basing politics on overly theoretical or quantitative economic models. It provides a powerful counterweight to those studies that present purely technical prescriptions, either focused on agricultural technologies, or on economic policies. Secondly, it highlights very important problems of corruption and illegal activities. Thirdly, it emphasises the interactions between state, society, and economy, rather than focusing on any one in isolation. In addition, it seems to provide an explanation of economic stagnation, and, related, partial implementation of economic and political reforms. Fifth, it emphasises the problems of capacity, noting there can be combinations of strong autonomy with weak capacity, and noting the political reasons for underinvestment in capacity. Lastly, some of this work has rightly recognised the role of unscrupulous foreign aid in prolonging misguided agricultural policies, programs and projects.

The methodological limitations of neopatrimonialism include a focus on a few exemplary countries (for example, Cameroon, DR Congo, Nigeria), a restricted range of sources, a tendency for selective anecdotes, and a propensity towards insufficient conceptual grounding and precision. These limitations are inseparable from the substantive flaws of the neopatrimonialism literature, which include over-generalisation, essentialism, functionalist explanations, inattention to actual agricultural production conditions, discounting rural and local politics and resistance, and ignoring important social differences (gender, age, religion, descent, and so forth) [*Mamdani, 1996; Theobald, 1999; Tripp, 2001; Martin, 2001; Mkandawire, 2001; Van Donge, 2002; Hagberg, 2002; Bernstein, 2003; Boone, 2003; Ottaway, 2003; Kelsall, 2003a; Ponte, 2004; Engel and Erdmann, in review*].

*Developmental States*

The inverse of a neopatrimonial state is often seen to be a ‘developmental state’, a term coined by Johnson (1982) in his study of Japan, and popularised by Gordon White and others [*Wade and White, 1984; see Low, 2004*]. The emphasis on developmental states came partly as a response to critics of direct state intervention in economies, and was spurred by research showing significant state intervention in rapidly growing and industrialising East Asian countries [*Amsden, 1989; Wade, 1990*]. The concept gained increased attention with the World Bank’s (1996) begrudgingly admission of state intervention in the East Asian successes [*Wade, 1996*]. As the concept was elaborated in more detail, analysts attempted to define distinguishing characteristics of developmental states. Leftwich (1996), for instance, characterised developmental states as containing a combination of determined developmental elite, relative state autonomy, powerful, competent and insulated economic bureaucracy, weak and subordinated civil society, effective management of non-state economic interests, and an emphasis on performance-based legitimacy even at the cost of repression.

Discussions about the concept of developmental states importantly contributed to our understanding that state intervention is not inimical to economic growth. It also led to a greater appreciation of the different types of bureaucracies that can exist. And it emphasised how countries vary in the extent to which their bureaucracies are ‘captured’ or ‘autonomous’ from social and economic groups.

Analysts have frequently contrasted ‘neopatrimonial’ African states with ‘developmental’ Asian ones [*Evans, 1989; Callaghy, 1994; Rapley, 1994; Sindzingre, 2004*], with the exceptions of Botswana and Mauritius. The developmental state model has also often been presented as an alternative model that African states can pursue rather than the ‘Washington Consensus’ (and NEPAD) vision of minimalist states [*Sibanda, 1993; Sandbrook, 1993; Lockwood, 2005*]. In relation to African agriculture, it is sometimes

suggested that a developmental state might provide an effective vehicle to usher in agricultural and industrial transformation [*Mars and White, 1986; Djurfeldt et al., 2005*]. In the mid-1990s some commentators briefly described South Africa as a potential developmental state [*Weimer, 1992; Picard and Garrity, 1995*]. By the late 1990s, there were speculations about whether Ghana would or could be a developmental state [*Fayemi et al., 2003*], as well as Burkina Faso [*Kevane and Englebert, 1997-1998*], and Lockwood (2005) mentions Uganda, Tanzania and Mozambique.

However, applying the concept of developmental states to Africa and to agriculture is inappropriate because in so doing we reify into an essentialised 'blueprint' what was the product of a particular geo-historical conjuncture. The economic successes of East Asian Newly Industrialised Countries are not entirely attributable to a shared type of state. Firstly, the states actually differed in terms of their industrial structure, sector specialisation, welfare provisions, and social stability [*Castells, 1992; Perkins, 1994*]. But more importantly, contextual factors were absolutely crucial. It is not possible to reproduce the particular conjuncture of East Asia, which involved highly specific national, continental, regional and international conditions [*Amsden, 1994*]. The states involved relatively small countries that had experienced land reform, had specific legacies of Japanese colonialism, had particular gender ideologies and dynamics, received massive foreign aid, had a security umbrella from the United States, faced regional security threats, and had strong linkages to a regional industrial power (Japan) in an era in which industrial manufacture was moving off shore from its historical bases in Europe and the US to new areas with cheaper labour [*Onis, 1991; Castells, 1992*]. To suggest that Botswana's 'developmental state' is prima facie evidence of the applicability of the model in Africa is likewise to ignore that country's unique context: a small population, massive foreign aid, and heavy reliance on diamond revenues and migratory employment in South Africa.

Developmental state blueprints also may not be particularly suited to understand and engineer *poverty* reduction and *agricultural* development in Africa [*van Dijk, 1992*].

Botswana's growth ought not be equated with sustained poverty reduction, as substantial inequality, disease, discrimination, and environmental degradation exist, together with significant pockets of deep poverty [*Good, 2005*].

Applying the concept to agriculture also may be misguided. The state autonomy lauded by analysts of the developmental state figures prominently partly because of its effects in controlling collective action by workers and hence maintaining low labour costs to attract private industrial investment. It is unwarranted to bluntly transfer the concept of developmental states to agriculture because the dynamics of labour, investment and growth in industry are significantly different than those of agriculture. It is arguable that the considerable diversity within agriculture requires popular participation in – rather than autonomy of – state services, projects and policies [*Scoones and Thompson, 1994; Scott, 1998*]. Indeed, even in the relatively more homogenous irrigated rice farming systems in East Asia, there is considerable need for participation, or, in other words, low autonomy of central ministries [*Moore, 1984a; Lam, 1996*]. Agricultural programs in key Green Revolution Asian states such as Taiwan and Japan were characterised by close farmer-researcher participation (though not always) [*Djurfeldt and Jirström, 2005; Jirström, 2005*]. In cases lauded as African exemplars of developmental states – the Kenya Tea Development Authority and the Botswana Meat Commission, for example – there was in fact significant representation of farmer interests in administrative structures [*Morrison, 1986; Brett, 1986; Alence, 2004*].

Where such participation has been absent there have been problems with agriculture in development states. Korea's green revolution program was initiated partly in response to rural unrest [*Shin, 1996*], but quickly became very top-down under General Park in the 1970s. As a result, although it managed to quickly increase productivity over several years, it

soon was plagued by widespread disease, farmer resistance, disadoption, and faltering production [Burmeister, 1988]. Poteete (2003: 462) illustrates that Botswana's autonomous bureaucracy has generated some problems for the countries livestock producers:

‘officials within Botswana’s meritocratic bureaucracy responded to national policies for range management in ways that downplayed local variations in ecological and socio-economic conditions and, in some places, ran counter to popular preferences’.

In addition, the gender dynamics at play in East Asian industrialisation differ from those in African agricultural development. In East Asian countries such as Taiwan, and even Malaysia, many migrant factory workers were women (and some young men), whilst relatively more men farmed [Seguino, 2000]. Such a feminised industrial workforce has been important to labour control by male-dominated developmental states. In Africa by contrast, mining, urban, export and plantation enclaves have drawn prime-aged men as migrants, whilst women, children and elderly have generally remained in rural areas (sometimes due to colonial law) [Cooper, 1996; O’Laughlin, 1998].<sup>3</sup> According to FAO statistics, for example, in sub-Saharan Africa, 59% of economically active men are engaged in agriculture, while for women the figure is 72% [FAOSTAT 2005]. Beyond these (questionable) aggregate statistics, the point is that gender ideologies and dynamics differentially shape state-society relations, history and policy within and between these two regions.

Key insights from the literature on development states then are the role of nationalism, of situating countries within a broader geo-political context, of closely examining different types of government officials, of distinguishing the differing administrative politics of agriculture and industry, of gendered labour processes, and of valuing democracy and human rights as intrinsic goods and goals of development. More work needs to be done to understand how bureaucracies relate to societies on agricultural issues (beyond research and extension), and how, given the multiplicity of organizations with tasks

relevant to agriculture [*Foster et al., 2001*], states can forge cohesive, coordinated strategies [*Chibber, 2002*].

### III. LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Lessons from past research on African agricultural politics and its critiques can be grouped roughly into three themes: the structural characteristics of African societies, economies and politics; key issues and dynamics that give rise to such characteristics; and methodological issues.

Firstly, we have gained insights about the structural characteristics of African states, geographies, social systems and economies. Reading political interests directly off of structural locations has become untenable as the notion that peasants were best defined uniformly by essential characteristics – what Bernstein and Byres (2000: 6) refer to as a ‘generic social type’ – have been displaced by a recognition of ‘the multiplicity of peasantries in Africa’ [*Cliffe, 1987: 634*], which vary both in their objective characteristics (net food balances, supra-local connections, hired labour, household size, taxation, trade, and so on) as well as subjectively. Peasant identities are now recognised as multiple, contextually dependent, and mutually constituted by class, gender, religion, agro-ecology, race, ethnicity, age, migration and other characteristics. Notions of full-time farmers have given way to multiple livelihoods constituted by both non-agricultural activities and different forms of agriculture (farming, forestry, fishing, livestock, gathering, etc.) that vary over space, time and society in relation to specific political and socio-economic dynamics. Analysts recognise that African states have different bureaucracies, internal structures, external links, relations with society and economies, and a range of different functions and instruments from decision-making to adjudication to different forms of implementation (indirect and direct

market regulation, projects and services). Appreciating such diversity does not mean crude empiricism and particularism, but rather a finer understanding of the processes by which such diversity is produced.

Insights into the processes that shape the diversity of African agricultural politics now recognise the importance of wars, uneven economic development, social movements, corruption, violence, repression, donors, state-society linkages, and different forms of power (violent, economic, political, legal, discursive, etc). The differences between economic growth, technical change and poverty reduction have also been underscored, and notions of poverty have broadened from income measures to multiple dimensions, with democracy and human rights not evaluated solely in terms of their instrumental value for greater income, but also as intrinsic goods in themselves. In addition, we have deepened our understandings of the difficulties, dynamics, and diversity of various forms of protest and resistance on a variety of issues in urban and rural areas.

Methodologically, a key lesson from past approaches is the importance of utilizing a range of triangulated sources, drawing on interdisciplinary methods based in empirical history and attending to local agency. The pitfalls of functionalism remain threatening, as analysts still too frequently explain phenomena not through actual detailed examination, but through appeals to their roles in fulfilling some sort of function for reified concepts such as ‘tradition’, ‘capital’, ‘rents’, ‘patronage’, or ‘transaction costs’. Finally, there is still too much generalization and suggestive argumentation based on anecdotal evidence.

While we have gained great insights about structure, process and method in political studies of African agricultural policy, there are at least eight important areas that have particularly been ignored yet warrant further attention: production-politics relationships, centre-local relations, interdisciplinary analysis, social difference, disease, agricultural sub-sectors, inter-sectoral linkages, and mineral wealth.

Firstly, there is a need for a (at least) two-way understanding of production and politics [*Hirschman, 1971; Barker, 1984*]. Whereas neo-Marxists tended to read politics off of the structure of production, urban bias and neopatrimonialism perspectives have tended to take political structure as given and examine only the impact of politics on production. A better approach would build on Giddens' (1984) notion of structuration, which emphasises that agency is exercised within the parameter of broader structures, which are themselves result from agency, a good example of which is Basset's (2001) study of cotton in Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>4</sup> Yet, political studies rarely seriously consider the specific dynamics of changing agricultural technology [*Bernstein and Byres, 2000: 27-8; cf. Bernstein, 1990*], and, conversely, much of the research on agricultural systems has been conducted under a narrow version of Farming Systems Research that explicitly ignores questions of politics and power [*deGrassi, 2003*]. Studies need to also consider how such technocratic visions of agriculture themselves are used politically.

Secondly, approaches have tended to focus on the central state and its national policies. While this may be partially justified due to the high centralisation of many African states, it is also increasingly clear that diverse patterns of centre-local relations are key to understanding agricultural policy [*Boone, 2003*] (rather than, say, viewing local case studies as simply as examples of the impact of uniform policies). While research on decentralisation and natural resources has boomed [*see Ribot, 2004 for a review*], there is much less on agricultural development and local government [*cf. Bowen, 2000; Harrison, 2000*]. The literature that does exist has yet to be organised around a coherent framework.

Thirdly, there is a need for inter-disciplinary analysis and innovative methodologies in the study of politics. The four approaches discussed in Section II have developed largely within conventional political science. Yet there are also, for example, anthropological approaches to understanding the state [*Worby, 1998; Moore, 1999; Helle-Valle, 2002;*

*Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Pieke, 2004*], corruption [*Sissener, 2001; Hasty, 2005*], accountability [*Hagberg, 2002; Kelsall, 2003b*] and citizenship [*Jones and Gaventa, 2002*]. The heavy (though not exclusive) reliance of political scientists on secondary and written data, largely from Western sources, sometimes may lead to mistaken assertions about the logic, strength and frequency of poor peasant mobilisation [*cf. Kriger, 1992*]. As Scott (1985: 36-7) notes, in a sharp rebuke of scholarship on peasant politics,

[Peasants'] safety lies in their anonymity. It is also extremely rarely that officials of the state wish to publicise the insubordination. History and social science, because they are written by an intelligentsia using written records ... is simply not well equipped ... Collectively, this unlikely cabal contributes to a stereotype of the peasantry, enshrined in both literature and in history, as a class that alternates between long periods of abject passivity and brief, violent, and futile explosions of rage.

The example of peasant mobilization illustrates how integrating different disciplinary insights and methods can bolster the study of agricultural politics in Africa.

Fourth, much of the paradigmatic approaches outlined in Section II ignore significant axes of social difference, including race, religion, age, nationality, and gender, which are both important arenas of 'non-state' politics as well as key parts of 'formal' state politics.

Religious organisations, for example, are some of the largest agricultural development agencies on the continent. Islam has long been closely connected with states and agriculture, particularly in Senegal [*Villalon, 1995*], and Africa is now a large and rapidly growing global centre of Christianity. The 1990s have seen the rise of numerous Christian NGOs operating hundreds of agricultural projects across Africa, many with budgets in the hundreds of millions of dollars (such as World Vision (\$806m) and Catholic Relief Services (\$544m)), as well as a coterie of smaller organisations with revenues of only several dozen millions (such as ADRA (\$75m), United Methodists Committee on Relief (\$54m), World Relief (\$42m),

Lutheran World Relief (\$28m), and World Concern (\$23m)) [*see also Farrington and Saasa, 2002; Bornstein, 2003*].<sup>5</sup> Religious organisations have played key roles not only in projects, but in democratisation [*e.g. Dorman, 2002*]. Gender dynamics are important to urban bias, development states, and (as the name would seem to imply) neo-patrimonialism. The fact that disproportionately more urban dwellers were men may have shaped their capacity to exercise political pressure, and vice versa with female farmers. Likewise, patrimonial networks can operate through a gender dynamic [*Tripp, 2001; Hansen, 2003*]. Dynamics of race and ethnicity have influenced the political and economic formation of African states, relations within the bureaucracy, and relations between states, civil society and business [*Mamdani, 1996*]. The periodic expulsions of Asian businessmen, for instance, are essential to understanding the dynamics of ‘embedded autonomy’ [*Vandenberg, 2003; Lall and Kraemer-Mbula, 2005*]. Also key is a historically contextualised understanding of the political implications of contemporary demographic change, not least in relation to HIV/AIDS [*Ghimire, 2002; de Waal and Argenti, 2003; Cliggett, 2005*].

Fifth, important relationships between politics and diseases have increasingly been recognized. Several commentators have begun to think through the impact of HIV/AIDS on politics, bureaucracy and governance, and vice versa [*Boone and Batsell, 2001; de Waal, 2003; Putzel, 2004; Moran, 2004; Patterson, 2005*]. These analyses go beyond a simple ‘missing manpower’ approach. In as much as land tenure is an object and motor of political change, then the ways in which HIV/AIDS reconfigures land struggles are also crucial [*FAO and SARPN, 2002*].

Sixth, the strong interaction between HIV/AIDS and agriculture illustrates clearly the great need for studies that examine the politics of links and differences between agriculture and other ‘sectors’ [*Lipton and de Kadt, 1987; e.g. Lipton and de Kadt, 1987; Foster et al., 2001; McCann, 2005*]. This is the logical outcome of a rural livelihoods perspective

[*Scoones, 1998*]. The importance of biased expenditure on health and education was emphasised by Lipton (1976), though not explicitly in relation to agriculture. The influence of education in technology adoption is often noted, but usually only as a variable in regression analysis. We need more understanding of complex but no less important inter-sectoral linkages, such as how education shapes demands for accountability of research, or access to inputs and markets.

Seventh, there is a need to understand how politics vary in different agricultural sub-sectors. Bates' (1981) early recognition that export and food crops have different politics has not been pursued any further. It is now time to recognise that policy and administration with regard to forestry, livestock and fishing may all have different logics than crop agriculture, yet these sub-sectors are no less important to well-being and growth. Pastoralists, for example, have to deal with the 'settlement' imperative of many [*Horowitz, 1986; Perrier and Norton, 1996; Majok and Schwabe, 1996; Chatty, 1996; Scott, 1998*]. In such disaggregated analysis, researchers need to avoid commodity determinism, while at the same time taking seriously the construction of and interaction between natural and social forces in agricultural development [*see Boyd et al., 2001 for an overview*]

Lastly, there is a need to think through the relations between politics, the rural sector and resource wealth. How do 'resource conflicts' and the violence they entail reconfigure donor relations, and shape politics in rural areas, urban centres, and relations between the two [*Herbst, 1990; De Boeck, 1998; Mkandawire, 2002; Richards, 2004*]. How does mineral wealth, for example, distort politicians' priorities, accountability and government spending in relation to agrarian change [*Moore, 2001*]? Which gendered migration patterns are constructed around mineral economies [*cf. Arrighi, 1970; O'Laughlin, 1998*], and with which political effects on agriculture at local and national levels?

These eight issues need to be combined and incorporated into the study of African agricultural politics. I do not claim that this list is comprehensive, and there may well be other important issues that need attention. Of course the study of these eight issues should build on, rather than replace, existing insights, which still need a great deal more study and clarification, as data are too sparse. In addition, both these new areas as well as the issues covered by the four existing politics paradigms need to be better integrated with political insights from other disciplines, such as geography, sociology, and so on.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

To summarise, four main approaches can be identified in political studies of African agricultural policy: structuralist neo-Marxist, urban bias, neo-patrimonialism, and developmental states. These each make important contributions, but also contain significant limitations. Building on the lessons from these approaches and the critiques thereof, at least eight thematic areas should be pursued in future research: production-politics relationships, centre-local relations, politics beyond the state, interdisciplinary analysis, social difference, disease, agricultural sub-sectors, and inter-sectoral linkages.

Bringing politics back onto the agenda requires understanding why and how they have been left off. This entails moving beyond simplistic explanations invoking academic disciplinary over-specialisation, lack of quality data, or conceptual refinement. Instead, it would involve examining limitations to historical, political scholarship by scant government funding, potential government repression, donor antipathy towards critical research and African universities, tied technical assistance reliant upon unfamiliar Western consultants, competitive research funding that prioritizes Western theoretical debates, the technocratic background of current research managers, local researchers over-burdened with advocacy,

expunging of non-orthodox economists from the World Bank, and the peculiar national trajectories of African studies in Europe and the United States. Bringing politics back in also requires thinking about which sorts of political analysis to focus on. There is a sharp distinction between much political science that is now based around rational choice and game theory models and statistical regressions, and more historical, contextualised approaches [*Friedman, 1996*].

If we are to improve our understanding of African politics by considering a greater range of actors and issues, a clarifying analytic is to chart the different powers such actors wield, and which mechanisms of downward accountability exist. It also involves examining the discourses that shape agricultural policy, building on the work on environmental discourses [*for example, Leach and Mearns, 1996; Keeley and Scoones, 2001*], but also studying the economic discourses that frequently dominate agricultural policy analysis. Some work has been done on economics in general [*McCloskey, 1998; Ruccio and Amariglio, 2003*], but more needs to look at the formation of scientific consensuses, influential networks of economic technocrats [*Huneus, 2000*], and ‘black boxing’ of uncertainties in agricultural development in particular (for example, the lack of environmental and gender considerations in influential CGE models) [*Fontana, 2003*].

Research surveys such as this cover much ground lightly. While it may be tempting to advance political studies by making small refinements in discipline-based models, I have argued here that a better approach is to build on the lessons and limitations from a wide range of studies, so as to not perpetuate flawed notions nor duplicate ‘discoveries’. Researching the important neglected areas identified above will entail ambitious work, and it remains to be seen whether a unified, consistent approach can draw together all the themes and concerns. Regardless, however, an important subject for future research will be what new

understandings of politics imply for old and new policy – and indeed political – instruments for reducing rural poverty in Africa.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bates' ideas and methods have changed over the years [*Stein and Wilson III, 1993*], but his main insights on African agricultural policy remain largely the same.

<sup>2</sup> ISI Web of Knowledge, <http://isiknowledge.com/>, accessed 25 October 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Textiles manufacture in South Africa are a prominent exception [*Hart, 2002*].

<sup>4</sup> As Barker (1984: 12) notes: 'Political motives—for staying in power and for rewarding regions and classes of loyal support—and political means—such as the use of administrative coercion—influence agricultural policy and shape patterns of production. Patterns of production, for their part, create social and economic interests and shape politics'.

<sup>5</sup> Figures are taken from the most recent annual reports available on the internet as of 1 August 2005.

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