

In from the margins?

The changing place of Africa in International Relations

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There is a paradox surrounding Africa's place within the study of International Relations (IR).¹ On the one hand, Africa has occupied something of a precarious position in the discipline, pushed to the margins of some mainstream approaches by their focus on Great Powers, 'the states that make the most difference', as Waltz put it.² Such marginalization is decried by critics of IR who divine an unbridgeable divide between 'mainstream' IR and Africa, some seeing in that divide a hegemonic and exclusionary project.³ Conceptually and theoretically, they argue, the 'western' origins and focus of IR mean Africa will always be a problematic 'other' in the discipline, at variance with a western norm. Others, meanwhile, conduct substantive research into a host of important issues that engage with issues pertinent to IR but pose little direct challenge to the theoretical, conceptual or methodological basis of the discipline. And yet Africa *is* increasingly present within IR in significant ways. It is the geographical space where much that is systemically important in international relations has played out, from colonial rule to resource competition to post-conditional aid dependency. It is the site of much empirical research into the practice of international relations, whether with regard to old and new security threats such as weak state contagion or piracy, or with regard to the impact of orthodox neo-liberal economics on policy-making and state reform. Africa is both the site of social change and uprising (as recently in North Africa) and the space in which new power configurations emerge (as in the case of Nigeria and South Africa) and old power configurations play out. The research on Africa in these areas is rich in empirical detail and would suggest that the continent represents a flourishing field for IR.

The purpose of this article is to begin to address three interrelated questions: Where is Africa in IR? How does the discipline of IR see and understand Africa?

¹ As is conventional, we reserve the capitalized term 'International Relations' (IR) to refer to the academic discipline and the lower-case 'international relations' to refer to substantive 'real world' practices of Africa's international relations, notwithstanding the obvious caveat that the discipline is also, in some ways at least, part of the 'real world'.

² Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of international politics* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 73.

³ Among many possible examples, see Kevin C. Dunn and Timothy M. Shaw, eds, *Africa's challenge to International Relations theory* (London: Palgrave, 2001); Scarlett Cornelissen, Fantu Cheru and Timothy M. Shaw, eds, *Africa and International Relations in the 21st century* (London: Palgrave, 2012); Pinar Bilgin, 'Thinking past "western" IR?', *Third World Quarterly* 29: 1, 2008, pp. 5–23; Arlene B. Tickner and Ole Waever, eds, *International Relations scholarship around the world* (London: Routledge, 2009); Branwen Gruffydd Jones, ed., *Decolonizing International Relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

What might African studies contribute to understanding IR? In so doing, the article assesses the paradoxical position of Africa within IR and the challenges facing IR scholars in their attempts to get to grips with contemporary issues in the continent's international relations. We argue that though Africa has at times been neglected within IR, it is the focus of increasingly rich empirical research across a varied field of issues. Nevertheless, while Africa is the site of many issue-based studies and provides empirically detailed accounts of international relations, many such accounts remain at arm's length from core conceptual and theoretical debates in IR. At best, Africa remains a case-study in which to explore international relations; at worst it is still, depressingly, wheeled on to the stage as representative of whatever delinquency, from state failure to the drugs trade, is exercising the analyst.⁴ Any challenge that Africa's politics and international relations might present to how we think about the field remains underexplored. The challenge and the opportunity is for African studies *and* IR to fully, but critically, engage with each other. Such an engagement requires both the use of, and critical reflection on, existing analytical tools within the discipline. However, for this engagement to be a productive one, IR scholars need to take the realities of African politics, and the role of African political actors, far more seriously and in a more nuanced way than has often been the case hitherto. The benefits of such a move would spread more widely, addressing IR's difficulties in 'worlding beyond the west'⁵ as well as providing richer analytical and empirical insights for policy-makers.

The article is based on a wide-ranging survey of key IR, African studies and development journals as well as other major works on Africa and international relations.⁶ We first review some of the theoretical debates about the lack of 'fit' between IR and Africa. Second, we consider how Africa is positioned in the majority of IR literature, as a case-study or a site in which particular issues can be explored, as well as reflecting on what such issue-specific accounts suggest about Africa and IR. Within this section we assess two cases in particular—the role of China and HIV/AIDS in Africa. These two cases represent areas of research that are both well developed in the literature and major concerns at the level of international policy. Both cases reveal how work on Africa's international relations that places African agency in international politics more centrally can open up a more productive engagement between Africa and IR. Finally, we reflect on some of the ways in which Africa and IR might be developed. While we reject the notion that there is an unbridgeable divide between the study of Africa and IR, considerable work remains to realize the potential that each holds for the development of the other.

⁴ Scarlett Cornelissen, Fantu Cheru and Timothy M. Shaw, 'Introduction: Africa and IR in the 21st century', in Cornelissen et al., eds, *Africa and International Relations in the 21st century*, pp. 1–17.

⁵ Tickner and Waever, eds, *International Relations scholarship around the world*.

⁶ This body of work included, but was not limited to, *African Affairs*, *European Journal of International Relations*, *International Affairs*, *International Political Sociology*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, *Millennium*, *Politikon*, *Review of African Political Economy*, *Review of International Political Economy*, *Review of International Studies*, *South African Journal of International Affairs* and *Third World Quarterly*.

Africa and IR: a problematic encounter?

For some writers the ‘problem’ of Africa and IR is simply a sin of omission—Africa offers much for understanding international relations but it remains a particular ‘blind spot’ in the discipline.⁷ This stance can take the form of an ‘Afro-optimism’ that emphasizes the need, and scope, to focus on ‘good news’ stories out of Africa that are otherwise ignored in favour of a stereotyping focus on the continent as the centre of disease, corruption and violence.⁸ Others suggest a need to consider the implications of Afro-pessimism,⁹ while yet others emphasize the centrality of Africa to processes of international relations.¹⁰

However, such arguments are connected to a deeper line of critique that suggests a lack of ‘fit’ between the discipline’s theoretical constructs and African realities. This is well-covered terrain that takes in a contested debate in both studies of Africa and postcolonial theories of international relations.¹¹ Three problem areas stand out in contemporary understandings: the western basis of IR theory and methods, liberalism and the state.

The most commonly cited problem facing IR in understanding Africa is that the discipline is somehow too western. Common theories of IR—liberalism, constructivism, realism—all rest on western conceptions of statehood, civil society, political processes and rationalities, and have been developed with reference to western historical processes of state formation. Africa, so the argument goes, is different from the West and thus does not fit within these western models of understanding international relations.¹² For some, IR theory reflects a practice of international relations which is inherently imperialist or colonial in its orientation towards Africa, and thus takes as its basis the need to civilize or reform Africa in a way that fits with western ideas about society, politics and international relations. According to this line of argument, Africa is always ‘the Other’ in IR, ‘the antithesis of Western subjectivity and institutional order’.¹³ Avoiding these

⁷ Kathryn Lavelle, ‘Moving in from the periphery: Africa and the study of international political economy’, *Review of International Political Economy* 12: 2, May 2005, pp. 364–79.

⁸ Jean-Michel Severino and Olivier Ray, *Africa’s moment* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011); Nana Poku and Anna Mdee, *Politics in Africa: a new introduction* (London: Zed, 2011).

⁹ William G. Martin, ‘Africa’s futures: from North–South to East–South?’, *Third World Quarterly* 29: 2, 2008, pp. 339–56.

¹⁰ Ian Taylor and Paul Williams, eds, *Africa in international politics: external involvement in the continent* (London: Routledge, 2004); Timothy M. Shaw, Fantu Cheru and Scarlett Cornelissen, ‘Conclusion: what futures for Africa’s international relations?’, in Cornelissen et al., eds, *Africa and International Relations in the 21st century*, pp. 194–211.

¹¹ See e.g. William Brown, ‘Africa and International Relations: a comment on IR theory, anarchy and statehood’, *Review of International Studies* 32: 1, 2006, pp. 119–44; Cornelissen et al., eds, *Africa and International Relations in the 21st century*; Dunn and Shaw, eds, *Africa’s challenge to International Relations theory*; Branwen Gruffydd Jones, ‘Africa and the poverty of International Relations’, *Third World Quarterly* 26: 6, 2005, pp. 987–1003; Gruffydd Jones, *Decolonizing International Relations*; Tickner and Waever, *International Relations scholarship around the world*.

¹² Patrick Chabal, *Africa: the politics of suffering and smiling* (London: Zed, 2009); Dunn and Shaw, eds, *Africa’s challenge to International Relations theory*; James Barber, ‘International Relations: stumbling into the third millennium’, *South African Journal of International Affairs* 6: 2, 1999, pp. 33–60; Ian Taylor, ‘Governance and relations between the European Union and Africa: the case of NEPAD’, *Third World Quarterly* 31: 1, Feb. 2010, pp. 51–67; Richard Adigbuo, ‘Beyond IR theories: the case for national role conceptions’, *Politikon* 34: 1, 2007, pp. 83–97.

¹³ Cornelissen et al., ‘Introduction: Africa and IR in the 21st century’, p. 1.

pitfalls means deconstructing all assumptions of what we mean by society, politics and the concepts we use to explain and understand international relations.¹⁴

A somewhat less reductionist take on this argument is offered by Gruffydd Jones, who suggests that the failure to explain Africa's international relations is both a problem of IR being too concerned with states and the 'pre-existing terms of the discipline' and a problem of development studies being too ahistorical and lacking in theoretical explanation.¹⁵ In this view, what is required is less a deconstruction of all political concepts and how they relate to different contexts, communities and individuals in different African countries, and more a development of explanations that encourage theoretical innovation and historical accounts of social change.¹⁶ Others see the shortcomings of IR in relation to Africa as having less to do with the theoretical insights the discipline offers and more to do with the units on which theory is built, which then become the focus of empirical analysis and the methodologies used for understanding African international relations. Lemke's work on African conflicts exemplifies this approach, retaining core ideas from Realism (an anarchic system structure and security-maximizing units practising self-help) but arguing that defining the relevant units as states is inappropriate in Africa, where substate political associations are engaged in 'realist-type' conflict with each other.¹⁷

Such western bias is reinforced by profound inequalities in the production of IR knowledge itself. Major western IR journals are dominated by scholars based in North America and Europe.¹⁸ Whether such bias is the result of persistent racism within academia¹⁹ or a reflection of the relative underdevelopment of the higher education sector in many parts of Africa, a lack of resources or remoteness from key academic networks, the outcome (as in the authorship and many of the citations in this article) is a wealth of commentary on Africa that is not from Africa. While geographical location and origin do not guarantee good scholarship, such undeniable bias remains an ongoing problem for a discipline that addresses the world as a whole.

Compounding these issues, critics argue, is the fact that IR is not just western—it is also liberal. Theory and practice reinforce each other here as liberal underpinnings of IR theory are used to interpret and support liberal programmes of reform in Africa promoted by western states. Of course, liberalism has informed much of the relationship between Africa and the West, from colonial encounters to present-day aid policies, and remains a productive focus for contemporary research.²⁰ While some analysts proceed on the basis of implicit or explicit

¹⁴ Chabal, *Africa: the politics of suffering and smiling*.

¹⁵ Gruffydd Jones, 'Africa and the poverty of International Relations'.

¹⁶ Gruffydd Jones, 'Africa and the poverty of International Relations'.

¹⁷ Douglas Lemke, 'Intra-national IR in Africa', *Review of International Studies* 37: 1, 2011, pp. 49–70; see also Douglas Lemke, 'African lessons for International Relations research', *World Politics* 56: 1, 2003, pp. 114–38.

¹⁸ Ole Waever and Arlene B. Tickner, 'Introduction: geocultural epistemologies', in Tickner and Waever, eds, *International Relations scholarship around the world*, pp. 1–31.

¹⁹ Shaw et al., 'Conclusion: what futures for Africa's international relations?'.

²⁰ See contributions to Mark Duffield and Vernon Hewitt, eds, *Empire, development and colonialism: the past in the present* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2009); David Williams, *The World Bank and social transformation in international politics: liberalism, governance and sovereignty* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); William Brown, 'The

normative claims of the need for more liberal reform, from both African states and the international system, to assist with the continent's development and flows of aid,²¹ particularly in sub-Saharan Africa,²² others argue that long-term externally imposed liberal reform has undermined African politics and the continent's position in the world.²³ Indeed, for many observers, the roots of contemporary political problems in Africa can be found in the inappropriate application of liberal norms to Africa, a practice continuing in 'liberal' peacebuilding based on western liberal notions of politics and justice.²⁴ For Young, liberalism is a project of programming and domination over people and communities that has failed to take hold in Africa because the continent does not easily accommodate liberal notions of justice, rights and civil society. In this sense, according to Young, liberalism is 'a project to be realised' in Africa.²⁵ In the actual practice of international relations, therefore, liberalism is a problem (depending on your viewpoint) either because liberal reform applied in Africa has had negative consequences for the continent or because African countries have not adopted enough liberal reform. Liberal understandings of the state, individual and society are based on ideas of rationality, the individual and the community that somehow are not seen to fit with African politics. Such 'inappropriateness' is reflected in IR theory, which, it is argued, does much to reinforce the very liberal norms and conceptualizations underlying the liberal project.

The third problem of Africa and IR—a theme that unites the general critique of IR (for being too western and ahistorical) and of liberal theory in particular (for misunderstanding the nature of African society)—is the problem of the state in Africa. Conceptions and theories of the African state present questions that have haunted the continent's place in IR. From the neo-patrimonial state and weak civil society that featured in the post-independence debates of the 1980s and 1990s²⁶ to the governance regimes of the 2000s,²⁷ the state in Africa is a contested terrain and has implications for how we understand IR as a whole and Africa's place within it. The central idea here was perhaps most cogently expressed in Clapham's argument that defining where statehood begins and ends in Africa is too empirically uncertain

Commission for Africa: results and prospects for the West's Africa policy', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 44: 3, Sept. 2006, pp. 349–74.

²¹ Rick Travis, 'Problems, politics and policy streams: a reconsideration of US foreign aid behaviour toward Africa', *International Studies Quarterly* 54: 3, 2010, pp. 797–821.

²² David K. Leonard, 'The US, France and military roles in the African "gap"', *Review of International Political Economy* 15: 2, April 2008, pp. 314–31.

²³ Graham Harrison, *Neoliberal Africa: the impact of global social engineering* (London: Zed, 2010).

²⁴ Paul Jackson, "'Negotiating with ghosts": religion, conflict and peace in northern Uganda', *Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 98: 402, June 2009, pp. 319–32; Danielle Beswick, 'The challenge of warlordism to post-conflict state-building: the case of Laurent Nkunda in Eastern Congo', *Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 98: 402, June 2009, pp. 333–46.

²⁵ Tom Young, 'A project to be realised: global liberalism and contemporary Africa', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 24: 3, December 1995, pp. 527–46.

²⁶ Michael Bratton and Nicholas van de Walle, *Democratic experiments in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Claude Ake, *The feasibility of democracy in Africa* (Dakar, Senegal: Codesria, 2000); Celestin Monga, 'Eight problems with African politics', *Journal of Democracy* 8: 3, 1997, pp. 156–70; Richard Sandbrook, 'Transitions without consolidation: democratization in six African cases', *Third World Quarterly* 17: 1, 1996, pp. 69–87.

²⁷ Graham Harrison, *The World Bank and Africa: the construction of governance states* (London: Routledge, 2004).

for theories based on rigid notions of statehood to be useful.²⁸ According to this argument, sovereignty in Africa is mere ‘letterbox’ statehood: that is, whoever occupies the government address is recognized as formally sovereign whatever the political realities on the ground. Such ideas are close to common arguments within IR about quasi- or weak statehood—arguments in which Africa often features as the prime exhibit.²⁹ The empirical and theoretical bases for such claims have been contested by other writers who argue that African states are not as weak as claimed, and that prior to colonialism communities in Africa exhibited elements of Westphalian state forms.³⁰

For IR, which is often claimed to be based on a notion of the Westphalian state, this creates real analytical problems, because models based on such conceptualizations are not seen to fit Africa. Traditional ideas about the security dilemma are a case in point here, with analysts arguing that issues of security in IR need to be rethought to account for the complexity and difference encountered in Africa.³¹ Similarly, others call for an ‘unbundling’ of ideas about territory and statehood and posit a need to ‘re-map authority and sovereignty’ by identifying different varieties of institutional types in Africa which can be positioned on a matrix of state/non-state and juridical/non-juridical forms.³² It is clear from such lines of argument that for many writers the state, sovereignty and statehood are not fixed categories of analysis when understanding Africa and IR but are complex and varied. In so far as the central units of analysis are the state, sovereignty and state behaviour, this presents mainstream IR with real questions (though not necessarily insurmountable obstacles, as some would argue). The case is not necessarily one of incompatibility between Africa and conceptions of international relations, but rather one in which the study of African statehood presents challenges and problems for IR. These problems do not require a wholesale deconstruction of core concepts, but do demonstrate a need to challenge preconceptions of what states are, how they behave, how they sit in relation to non-state actors and how they operate in the international system.

The underlying basis of these arguments—across a broad and varied range of literature—is that Africa is somewhat different, or sits outside international relations, and therefore that contemporary IR is irrelevant to explaining Africa and how it relates to international politics. These are sweeping arguments,

²⁸ Christopher Clapham, *Africa and the international system: the politics of state survival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Christopher Clapham, ‘Degrees of statehood’, *Review of International Studies* 24: 2, 1998, pp. 143–57.

²⁹ Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-states: sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); A. G. Hopkins, ‘Quasi-states, weak states and the partition of Africa’, *Review of International Studies* 26: 2, 2000, pp. 311–20.

³⁰ Carolyn M. Warner, ‘The political economy of “quasi-statehood” and the demise of 19th century African politics’, *Review of International Studies* 25: 2, 1999, pp. 233–55; Carolyn M. Warner, ‘A reply to A. G. Hopkins’, *Review of International Studies* 26: 2, 2000, pp. 321–5; Carolyn M. Warner, ‘The rise of the state system in Africa’, *Review of International Studies* 27: 5, 2001, pp. 65–89; Stein Sundstol Eriksen, ‘“State failure” in theory and practice: the idea of the state and the contradictions of state formation’, *Review of International Studies* 37: 1, 2011, pp. 229–48.

³¹ Paul D. Williams, ‘Thinking about security in Africa’, *International Affairs* 83: 6, Nov. 2007, pp. 1021–38.

³² Ulf Engel and Gorm Rye Olsen, ‘Authority, sovereignty and Africa’s changing regimes of territorialization’, in Cornelissen et al., eds, *Africa and International Relations in the 21st century*, pp. 51–65.

suggesting that all IR theory is irrelevant. Indeed, such claims actually reinforce the notion of Africa as an ‘other’, an exceptional region that sits outside the bounds of established scholarship, while at the same time essentializing both African and European history.³³ In fact, the notion that IR theory is redundant often comes down to a more limited claim that variants of Realism are redundant.³⁴ For example, Taylor criticizes as a ‘blight’ on the discipline what he sees as South African IR scholars’ preoccupation with Realism as the main mode of theoretical endeavour.³⁵ Furthermore, while some aspects of African politics sit uneasily with Realist assumptions, this is arguably also the case for other regions, including Europe. More importantly, there is a wide range of research that suggests the ‘separation’ of Africa from IR is overstated and directly addresses questions of Africa’s international relations.

Africa: the international relations case-study

Perhaps surprisingly, given the long-standing claims about Africa and IR surveyed above, there is in fact a burgeoning literature on Africa’s international relations which broadly falls into two groups: first, a set of analyses that apply existing IR theoretical models to African cases; and second, a much larger and more empirically focused literature which explores different dimensions of international relations within Africa, but with much less conceptual or theoretical reflection. Work in this second category does not fall into the camp of what Vale identifies as ‘airport literature’ that describes a homogeneous relationship between Africa and ‘globalization’, devoid of any engagement with IR theory,³⁶ but rather uses particular countries and issues in Africa as a means to explore ideas in contemporary IR.

Constructivism—in line with its rise as a theoretical approach within IR more generally—has been increasingly used to explain a wide range of issues in Africa. These have ranged from the changing nature of cooperation between donors on the continent³⁷ to institutional design and change within the African Union,³⁸ the ideational bases for a ‘west African peace’,³⁹ EU policy towards Africa⁴⁰ and the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.⁴¹ Similarly, liberal institutionalist models and variants of regime theory are used to provide helpful

³³ Brown, ‘Africa and International Relations’.

³⁴ Adigbuo, ‘Beyond IR theories’.

³⁵ Ian Taylor, ‘Rethinking the study of International Relations in South Africa’, *Politikon* 27: 2, 2000, pp. 207–20.

³⁶ Peter Vale, ‘The Movement, modernity and new International Relations writing in South Africa’, *International Affairs* 78: 3, July 2002, pp. 585–93.

³⁷ Luo Jianbo and Zhang Xiaomin, ‘Multilateral cooperation in Africa between China and western countries’, *Review of International Studies* 37: 4, 2001, pp. 1793–813.

³⁸ Paul D. Williams, ‘The Peace and Security Council of the African Union: evaluating an embryonic international institution’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 47: 4, 2009, pp. 603–26.

³⁹ Cameron G. Thies, ‘Explaining zones of negative peace: the construction of a west African Lockean culture of anarchy’, *European Journal of International Relations* 16: 3, 2009, pp. 391–415.

⁴⁰ Siegfried Schieder, Rachel Folz and Simon Musekamp, ‘The social construction of European solidarity: Germany and France in the EU policy towards the states of Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific (ACP) and Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC)’, *Journal of International Relations and Development* 14: 4, 2011, pp. 469–505.

⁴¹ Séverine Autesserre, *The trouble with the Congo: local violence and the failure of international peacebuilding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

insights into explaining EU and US policy towards Africa and the development of peace and security arrangements within the African Union.⁴² Realist accounts of interstate collaboration (or lack thereof) and English School-inspired accounts of the struggle of emerging powers such as South Africa to gain recognition in the international system⁴³ also feature, as does criticism of such accounts.⁴⁴ Neo-Gramscian analyses of state–society relations and of the external influence of global economic forces and international institutions such as the World Bank have offered explanations of both the impact of external actors on states in (particularly, East) Africa and the implications of such an impact for how we understand the work of such institutions and hegemony in the region.⁴⁵

Indeed, the range of empirical issues widens much further once one brings into consideration research conducted on Africa in the field of development studies, much of which touches on diverse aspects of the continent's international interactions. Development studies and international relations are in many ways both natural and uneasy bedfellows. For some, international relations is one aspect of development studies; for others, international development falls under the broader umbrella of international relations. As a result, those who conduct research into Africa and international relations can and do straddle both camps.⁴⁶

A number of things are suggested by this wide range of research, and by the application of mainstream IR theory in the attempt to explain and understand a variety of aspects of Africa's international politics. The first is that there has been something of a shift in the literature within the past decade or so, before which such mainstream applications of IR theory to Africa were rather rarer. It appears that, for some analysts at least, IR theory *can* be applied productively to exploring aspects of Africa's international politics, and that Africa's 'absence' from IR is less marked than it perhaps was.⁴⁷ However, we should note that such theory is commonly applied to explaining the formation of liberal or western notions of institutions and policy processes. As such, while standing as something of a rebuff to the claims of a lack of fit between IR theory and Africa, it remains susceptible to the counter-claim that such analysis shoehorns African processes, policy and institutions into existing western theoretical models. As a result, second, such

⁴² João Gomes Porto and Ulf Engel, 'The African Peace and Security Architecture: an evolving security regime?', in Ulf Engel and João Gomes Porto, eds, *Africa's new Peace and Security Architecture: promoting norms, institutionalising solutions* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 143–62; Gorm Rye Olsen, 'Civil–military cooperation in crisis management in Africa: American and European Union policies compared', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 14: 3, 2011, pp. 333–53.

⁴³ Gordon D. Cumming and Tony Chafer, 'From rivalry to partnership? Critical reflections on Anglo–French cooperation in Africa', *Review of International Studies* 37: 5, 2011, pp. 2439–63; Philip Nel, 'Redistribution and recognition: what emerging regional powers want', *Review of International Studies* 36: 4, 2010, pp. 951–74.

⁴⁴ Brown, 'Africa and International Relations'; Beth Elise Whitaker, 'Compliance among weak states: Africa and counter-terrorism', *Review of International Studies* 36: 3, 2010, pp. 639–62.

⁴⁵ Harrison, *The World Bank and Africa*; Vale, 'The Movement, modernity and new International Relations writing in South Africa'.

⁴⁶ See Gruffydd Jones, 'Africa and the poverty of International Relations'; William Brown, 'Reconsidering the aid relationship: International Relations and social development', *Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 98: 402, June 2009, pp. 285–300.

⁴⁷ The shift in tone and substance from Dunn and Shaw, eds, *Africa's challenge to International Relations theory*, in 2001, to its 2012 partner volume, Cornelissen et al., eds, *Africa and International Relations in the 21st century*, is illustrative of this point.

In from the margins?

applications of theory stimulate further debate and contention over the validity and suitability of those theoretical models. This is clear in the debates over the application and relevance of neo-realism. Even so, in this literature Africa does provide a testing ground for the application of IR theory rather than being viewed as a continent so divorced from accepted assumptions about politics and society that existing theory needs to be rejected outright. In the end this position is not radically different from that of any area studies literature that is engaged with debates arising from the application of necessarily abstract ‘universal’ analytical models to the particularities of a specific region. As Taylor summarizes: ‘Mature analysis of Africa’s place in the world necessitates an understanding of how ... state–society relations, the society of states and the non-state world interact with the global political economy and influence the affairs of [sub-Saharan Africa’s] peoples and communities.’⁴⁸

The second group of literature is less theoretically engaged, being concerned rather with analysing a variety of substantive issues or cases covering many different aspects, topics and practices of Africa’s international politics. This is evident in the recourse to Africa as an empirical base for understanding changes in foreign policy, new security threats, and the political economy of development. The wealth of empirically based analyses of migration,⁴⁹ health, transnational crime,⁵⁰ the environment and technology⁵¹ in Africa shows how the continent is used as a—often the primary—case-study for exploring such issues, the changing nature of international policy and governance towards them, and their impact on questions of sovereignty in the region.⁵² Analyses of changes in South African foreign policy and African peacekeeping, or ‘African solutions to African problems’,⁵³ are often used as a basis on which to construct an understanding of African solidarity, South–South cooperation, and the growth of alternative ideas and interventions in the international system.⁵⁴ Accounts of shifts in foreign policy towards Africa on the part of states such as the United Kingdom demonstrate the changing patterns of European engagement with the international system.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Ian Taylor, *The international relations of sub-Saharan Africa* (New York and London: Continuum, 2010).

⁴⁹ David Styan, ‘The security of Africans beyond borders: migration, remittances and London’s transnational entrepreneurs’, *International Affairs* 83: 6, Nov. 2007, pp. 1171–91.

⁵⁰ Antonio L. Mazzitelli, ‘Transnational organized crime in West Africa: the additional challenge’, *International Affairs* 83: 6, Nov. 2007, pp. 1071–90.

⁵¹ Chris Alden, ‘Let them eat cyberspace: Africa, the G8 and the digital divide’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 32: 3, Dec. 2003, pp. 457–76.

⁵² Sophie Harman, ‘Fighting HIV and AIDS: reconfiguring the state?’, *Review of African Political Economy* 36: 121, 2009, pp. 353–67; Loren B. Landau, ‘Immigration and the state of exception: security and sovereignty in East and Southern Africa’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 34: 2, Feb. 2006, pp. 325–48.

⁵³ Rok Ajulu, ‘Thabo Mbeki’s African renaissance in a globalising world economy: the struggle for the soul of the continent’, *Review of African Political Economy* 28: 87, 2001, pp. 27–42; John Stremlau, ‘African Renaissance and International Relations’, *South African Journal of International Affairs* 6: 2, 1999, pp. 61–80.

⁵⁴ See e.g. James Barber, ‘The new South Africa’s foreign policy: principles and practice’, *International Affairs* 81: 5, Oct. 2005, pp. 1079–96; Christine Gray, ‘Peacekeeping and enforcement action in Africa: the role of Europe and obligations of multilateralism’, *Review of International Studies* 31 (suppl.), 2005, pp. 207–23; Katharina P. Coleman, ‘Innovations in “African solutions to African problems”: the evolving practice of regional peacekeeping in sub-Saharan Africa’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 49: 4, 2011, pp. 517–45.

⁵⁵ Tom Porteous, ‘British government policy in sub-Saharan Africa under New Labour’, *International Affairs* 81: 2, March 2005, pp. 281–97.

Indeed, the scope and diversity of areas in which Africa is used as a case-study are huge, perhaps the greatest for all areas of the world.

Perhaps most importantly, what is clear from these varied studies is that these accounts not only reveal much about Africa's international relations but also tell us a substantial amount about international politics and policy challenges more broadly. To explore further the problems and potential that African IR might hold, we focus here on two issues that are prominent in the literature on Africa and international politics: first, China's role in changing global power relations; and second, HIV/AIDS. These represent what may be seen (rather misleadingly) as 'hard' and 'soft' issues in international politics; they are issues that are important within Africa; and they are indicative of how African cases are used as empirical evidence for claims about wider changes in international relations. However, more importantly for our purposes, they are issues that show the potential for work on Africa to contribute to a better understanding of both IR and policy challenges more widely.

China, Africa and changing configurations of power

A prominent issue within which Africa has featured in wider IR debates has been China's foreign relations. Evidence in support of the 'rise' of China and the changing configurations of power with the emergence of countries such as Brazil and India has rested in the main on the sustained economic growth of these countries and US dependence on China as main trading partner and owner of US public debt. For some, such economic growth does not necessarily equate to political power; China does not (yet) have a fully developed foreign policy beyond the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,⁵⁶ and shows minimal leadership in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations. Africa, however, has been used as a main source of evidence to counteract such arguments and to outline the changing interests and international relations of China beyond the Five Principles. Africa provides a central arena in which shifting configurations of power, and most notably the growing influence of China, play out in the political and diplomatic, as well as economic, context.⁵⁷

Research on China and Africa reveals several things about Africa's international relations and wider shifts in influence in the international system. For many, China's primary interest in Africa is about access to the continent's raw materials and resources. According to Taylor, China's 'oil diplomacy' has the primary intent of securing China's oil supply.⁵⁸ This represents a challenge to the West, first in how it responds to China's growing interest and second in how western states can adapt some of their conditional forms of lending and foreign policy to appear more attractive to African partners.⁵⁹ Much literature has focused on

⁵⁶ The 1954 Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are: non-interference in internal affairs, peaceful coexistence, equality and mutual benefit, non-aggression, and mutual respect for territory.

⁵⁷ Horace Campbell, 'China in Africa: challenging US global hegemony', *Third World Quarterly* 29: 1, Feb. 2008, pp. 89–105.

⁵⁸ Ian Taylor, 'China's oil diplomacy in Africa', *International Affairs* 82: 5, Oct. 2006, pp. 937–59.

⁵⁹ Taylor, 'China's oil diplomacy in Africa'.

the difference between Chinese and western approaches to aid and foreign policy in the region. For Gallagher, the response of some countries, such as the UK, has been to portray China as the 'villainous other' to be brought to the liberal way of doing development in Africa, in a fashion reminiscent of the UK's 'self-idealization' in the region.⁶⁰ As Gallagher argues, such a portrayal 'points to an important characteristic of the very idealized liberal cosmopolitanism expressed in reaction to Africa: namely a sense of ambiguity about the universality of liberalism'.⁶¹ However, for others, the difference between Chinese and western approaches to aid will lead to shifts in knowledge and ideas in the international system, with both East and West accommodating such difference in pursuit of the gains that can be made by cooperating over policy towards Africa.⁶² In this way, debates over China's role in Africa draw us into classic international relations problems of competition over resources, and the balance between relative and absolute gains from mutual cooperation, all of which are involved in this aspect of Africa's international relations. However, greater attention could be paid to the fact that Africa is the space in which these relationships are played out; attention to the rise of China necessitates also attention and focus on the role of Africa within this context.

Much of this body of research tends to suggest that African states are rather passive recipients of external actions, mere backdrops in front of which what Carmody calls 'the new scramble for Africa'—larger states wanting to gain resources and economic advantages—plays out.⁶³ Such accounts tend to ignore how the new scramble opens up the potential for agency to African states themselves, offering the opportunity to play such interests off against each other and use shifts in power to pursue their own interests.⁶⁴ The tensions Taylor highlights with regard to the West's competition with China and the durability of China's peaceful coexistence should African states renege on agreements⁶⁵ suggest that the presence of China does offer new space and opportunities for African states to exert influence in the international system. Such arguments can be extended more widely: for example, in his work on India and Africa, Taylor argues that the degree to which India is a 'scrambler or development partner ... depends on African agency'.⁶⁶ One of the openings for Africa through such change is seen to be increased involvement with 'trilateral' relations between South Africa, India and Brazil;⁶⁷ however, the degree to which such 'trilateralism' will benefit the

⁶⁰ Julia Gallagher, 'Ruthless player or development partner? Britain's ambiguous reaction to China in Africa', *Review of International Studies* 37: 5, 2011, pp. 2293–310.

⁶¹ Gallagher, 'Ruthless player or development partner?'

⁶² Jianbo and Xiaomin, 'Multilateral cooperation in Africa between China and western countries'.

⁶³ Pádraig Carmody, *The new scramble for Africa* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

⁶⁴ William Brown and Sophie Harman, 'African agency in international politics', in William Brown and Sophie Harman, eds, *African agency in international politics* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2013).

⁶⁵ Taylor, 'China's oil diplomacy in Africa'.

⁶⁶ Ian Taylor, 'India's rise in Africa', *International Affairs* 88: 2, March 2012, pp. 779–98.

⁶⁷ Chris Alden and Marco Antonio Vieira, 'The new diplomacy of the South: South Africa, Brazil, India and trilateralism', *Third World Quarterly* 26: 7, Oct. 2005, pp. 1077–95; Scarlett Cornelissen, 'Awkward embraces: emerging and established powers and the shifting fortunes of Africa's international relations in the twenty-first century', *Politikon* 36: 1, 2009, pp. 5–26.

majority of African countries, particularly those with the resources wanted by other states, rather than just South Africa, is questionable.

What the role of China and growing economies such as India tells us about Africa and international relations is thus not limited to Africa as a case-study or passive entity in which changing configurations of power continue to play out or as a region wholly bound by structural social and economic forces. Even during the era of colonialism and the Cold War, African states and other political actors were able to exercise choices within the spaces opened up by contending external powers.⁶⁸ Today, the rise of China suggests a shifting terrain of international relations in which Africa is at the core, with the potential opportunity to make aggressive use of the space created by the presence of China to exert greater agency in the international system.

The case-study of China thus reveals a number of points about Africa and IR. First, Africa is a key site in which changing configurations of power are being played out, where western states remain interested in asserting their influence and where growing economies see their interests as best served. However, second, the attempt by external powers to assert influence over Africa, for example through colonial scrambles and Cold War proxy wars, presents an opportunity for African states to assert their influence and agency by playing off China and the West against each other and using the interests of these states to their own advantage. Hence the resurgence of states such as China is not just about middle-income countries or South Africa, but reflects a wider opening of space within the international system in which Africa plays a central role. Third, though classical concepts of relative and absolute gains can be applied to these changes, they may obscure some of the distinctive features of the context and the gains that can be made by African states and economic interests within these relationships. In other words, the rise of China is not just about what China and the West can get out of Africa and their competition in doing so, but rather what Africa can get out of such competition. Finally, Africa as a site for exploring Chinese foreign policy and resource extraction provides empirical evidence in support of the political and diplomatic evidence for China's increased prominence in international affairs, which has often taken a back seat behind the country's economic growth. Much attention has focused on the economic aspects of China's growing importance in international politics; Africa provides ample evidence and cases for exploration with regard to China's growing political role.

HIV/AIDS: new security threat, development challenge and model of governance

A very different case-study that demonstrates Africa's centrality to international relations is how the global spread and management of HIV/AIDS exemplifies

⁶⁸ On the Cold War, see Clapham, *Africa and the international system*; on colonialism, see e.g. Roland Robinson, 'The excentric idea of imperialism, with or without empire', in Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds, *Imperialism and after: continuities and discontinuities* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986).

In from the margins?

new modalities of aid giving, the rise of new global actors and partnerships, and a supposed threat to national and international security. Of the 33 million people in the world living with HIV/AIDS, 22 million live in sub-Saharan Africa,⁶⁹ and hence considerable amounts of global aid spending on responding to the disease are directed to the region. Studies of HIV/AIDS are often seen as predominantly about or relevant to Africa. The growth of literature on HIV/AIDS as a means of understanding new security threats, governance reform, the changes to the political economy of development and gendered power relations shows the broader implications of studies of the disease for how we think not only about HIV/AIDS and how the disease relates to global health but also about international politics more broadly. Studies of HIV/AIDS emerging from case-studies on the African epidemics have impacted on how we think about the military and peacekeepers,⁷⁰ reform of the state,⁷¹ global inequality,⁷² securitization,⁷³ and the perception of risk⁷⁴ in international politics.

Perhaps one of the most influential contributions of the studies of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa has been to debates on security, new security threats, and securitization in international relations. The framing of HIV/AIDS as a new security threat both in the United Nations Security Council, with Resolution 1308 (2000), and within a broad range of literature, has attracted wider attention in IR with regard to debating what constitutes a security threat and the sources of such threats.

The securitization of HIV/AIDS offers a similar insight to that of the Chinese case-study with regard to the ability of African states to use this frame to leverage greater financial support for aid programmes.⁷⁵ Some African states have been adept at doing this. However, the extent to which African actors have done so is perhaps overstated, as the securitization frame was very much the work of a global HIV/AIDS community with a long history of effective advocacy campaigns.⁷⁶

Beyond security, HIV/AIDS in Africa has provided a case-study through which to explore coordination, hierarchy, and the practice of international institutions and systems of governance, with particular reference to multisectoralism, goal-

⁶⁹ UNAIDS, *World AIDS Day Report 2011*, http://www.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/documents/unaidspublication/2011/JC2216_WorldAIDSday_report_2011_en.pdf, accessed 8 Nov. 2012.

⁷⁰ Robert O. Ostergard, 'Politics in the hot zone: AIDS and national security in Africa', *Third World Quarterly* 23: 2, 2002, pp. 333–50; Peter W. Singer, 'AIDS and international security', *Survival* 44: 2, 2002, pp. 145–58.

⁷¹ Harman, 'Fighting HIV and AIDS'; Kondwani Chirambo, 'AIDS and democracy in Africa', in Nana Poku, Alan Whiteside and Bjorg Sandkjaer, eds, *AIDS and governance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 67–92.

⁷² Tony Barnett, 'HIV/AIDS and development concern us all', *Journal of International Development* 16: 7, 2004, pp. 943–9.

⁷³ Colin McInnes, 'HIV/AIDS and security', *International Affairs* 82: 2, 2006, pp. 315–26; Colin McInnes and Simon Rushton, 'HIV, AIDS and security: where are we now?', *International Affairs* 86: 1, Jan. 2010, pp. 225–45; Stefan Elbe, 'Should HIV/AIDS be securitized? The ethical dilemmas of linking HIV/AIDS and security', *International Studies Quarterly* 50: 1, 2006, pp. 121–46.

⁷⁴ Stefan Elbe, 'Risking lives: AIDS, security and three concepts of risk', *Security Dialogue* 39: 2–3, 2008, pp. 177–98.

⁷⁵ Marco Antonio Vieira, 'Southern Africa's response(s) to international HIV/AIDS norms: the politics of assimilation', *Review of International Studies* 37: 1, 2011, pp. 3–28; McInnes and Rushton, 'HIV, AIDS and security: where are we now?'

⁷⁶ Sophie Harman, 'Searching for an executive head? Leadership and UNAIDS', *Global Governance* 17: 4, 2011, pp. 429–46.

orientated policy-making and partnership.⁷⁷ Studies by Seckinelgin and Harman have demonstrated how HIV/AIDS has been used by international actors in a wider process of reform of state–society relations in (particularly East) Africa.⁷⁸ Such studies use countries including Burundi, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda as examples of a much broader use of states of emergency as justification for wider liberal reforms of state–society relations. Such studies may predominantly focus on these states as the subject of reform, but they also highlight areas of agency within society with particular reference to community activism within these countries. Moreover, the policies and processes of HIV/AIDS relief acted out in these parts of Africa are test cases for wider multilevel governance systems based on shared practices and engagement between the state and civil society. Therefore, these studies suggest that Africa is not just acted upon by global systems of governance (made up of international institutions, global policies, medical knowledge and foreign aid flows) but includes areas of rapid change and health reform that offer much to wider understanding of global health governance and global governance more broadly.

A galvanizing factor in the attention paid to HIV/AIDS in international relations has been its prominence in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the unprecedented financial backing it has received from the international community.⁷⁹ The attention given in the MDGs to HIV/AIDS, particularly in Africa, has put the continent at the centre of the international development agenda. The challenge of HIV/AIDS in Africa has contributed significantly to the establishment of new institutions such as the Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, UNITAID and the GAVI Alliance, and has generated attention from new philanthropists such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. These new actors in international relations offer insights into the changing nature of power, influence, private wealth, multisectoral partnership, and agency within the international system,⁸⁰ and the one area in which such changes are clearly seen and expressed is Africa.

HIV/AIDS in Africa has thus made two significant contributions to IR in the field of security studies and global governance. The aid money disbursed in response to the new security threat posed by HIV/AIDS, and African state reactions to this intervention, demonstrate the efficacy of security framing in international development and in getting global attention for an issue. The new institutions of governance developed to respond to the challenge of HIV/AIDS in Africa provide test cases of global governance that are increasingly being reviewed

⁷⁷ Sophie Harman, *The World Bank and HIV/AIDS* (London: Routledge, 2010); Garrett Wallace Brown, 'Multisectoralism, participation, and stakeholder effectiveness: increasing the role of non-state actors in the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria', *Global Governance* 15: 2, 2009, pp. 169–77.

⁷⁸ Hakan Seckinelgin, *International politics of HIV/AIDS* (London: Routledge, 2008); Harman, *The World Bank and HIV/AIDS*.

⁷⁹ Franklyn Lisk, *Global institutions and the HIV/AIDS epidemic* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); Sophie Harman, *Global health governance* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

⁸⁰ For more on the growing influence and practices of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, see David McCoy, Gayatri Kembhavi, Jinesh Patel and Akish Luintel, 'The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's grant-making programme for global health', *The Lancet* 373: 9675, 2009, pp. 1645–53.

In from the margins?

and positioned as potential models to be replicated in other areas of governance such as climate change (with the creation of the Green Climate Fund). To an extent, African actors play a central role in how security agendas are manipulated and governance arrangements are shaped; however, this is only part of a much more contentious political engagement with international institutions. Africa is not only used as the empirical basis in which these areas are explored; it is also the site of normative arguments about the need to act in the international system. In this sense Africa is used as a site in which to assess the rise of liberal norms and cooperation around a system of HIV/AIDS governance, how disease or another issue can become constructed as a security threat, and the mechanisms through which aid attempts to transform state–society relations. All of these point to core themes in IR of conflict and cooperation, agenda- and policy-setting, and human security. Here, then, Africa not only *does* ‘fit’ IR but represents a case-study that establishes the basis from which debates can be developed and existing ideas challenged, and presents the institutional framework for new forms of multi-sectoral and multilevel forms of governance in international relations.

Policy implications

Taken together, the cases of China and HIV/AIDS in Africa not only show how the continent is the subject of the practice of international relations, but also demonstrate the relevance of such practice in relation to Africa to policy-makers in both domestic and foreign policy. On the domestic side, ways of governing HIV/AIDS and experiments in health systems reform offer opportunities to test new ways of delivering old policy ideas such as public health insurance schemes and sophisticated community engagement models. The introduction of new welfare models, pension schemes, and technology for communications and energy extraction in Africa do not necessarily represent examples of best practice, but they do provide insights into new policy ideas and case-studies on reform whose relevance is not limited to African societies.

In many ways Africa has been a testing ground for new policy ideas brought from Latin America, the US and Europe. Greater recognition of such trials may assist policy-makers in the domestic context in areas such as engaging with communities, fostering public–private partnerships in welfare provision and resource extraction, and using technology in democracy promotion, financial transactions and public information exchange. Despite evidence that such new policy experiments are developed in other parts of the world—for example, technology in election campaigning in the US, public–private partnerships in Europe, and cash transfers in Latin America—Africa is a key space in which a wide range of these new policy ideas are applied, replicated and developed. While in some cases, such as cash transfers, Africa is the site of second-generation application of policy, in others, such as mobile technology for public service information, it has been at the forefront. For policy-makers looking for new ideas or new ways of applying old concepts within their own domestic space, Africa is of central relevance. Such recognition not only

acknowledges Africa as a site of policy practice, but also begins to invert the idea that the continent is the recipient rather than the generator of international policy.

The policy implications of a renewed engagement with Africa's international relations extend from the domestic sphere to the international. Policy-makers have long seen the continent as an area to be acted on; now they have to adjust foreign policy towards Africa to account for increased African agency in areas such as climate change, peacekeeping and institutional reform.⁸¹ While external donors still have significant influence, and many African leaders remain keen not to offend investors from China, the US and Europe, there is a growing number of examples of African actors manipulating relations with donors to their own advantage. Countries such as Rwanda have been effective in invoking the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in seeking more national control over aid programmes and better coordination among donors in directing how money is spent.⁸² Discovery of natural resources such as gas has given Tanzania, for example, an alternative source of income. The growth of regional bodies such as the African Union and regional development banks such as the African Development Bank gives countries greater choice as to where and how they borrow, and more importantly leads to changes in the policies and staff of these and other lending bodies.

While the degree to which such factors will enhance African agency remains to be seen, these rapid changes on the continent do have several repercussions for international policy-makers. Donor countries working through the OECD Development Assistance Committee can no longer be complacent about the influence their donations buy, as alternative sources become available to African countries. Nor can western countries assume a stable relationship between their energy sectors and those of Africa, as not only Chinese enterprises but also Brazilian firms such as Petrobras gain increasing prominence. Moreover, knowledge of international policy, particularly development policy, is no longer the exclusive preserve of institutions like the World Bank which, though still very influential, now has to respond to competing knowledge bases within both individual countries and regional development banks.⁸³ In all these areas, neglect of Africa's international relations not only demonstrates a blind spot in the discipline of IR, it also poses problems for policy-makers in adapting their foreign policies to new forms of interdependence with Africa.

A renewed agenda for Africa and IR

The specific issues of China and HIV/AIDS, and the wider survey above, demonstrate that there is a wealth of literature that uses Africa as its empirical base and which also has far-reaching implications for how we understand a broad array of processes, changes, institutional arrangements, power configurations and

⁸¹ See Brown and Harman, eds, *African agency in international politics*.

⁸² Sven Grimm, Heike Höß, Katharina Knappe, Marion Siebold, Johannes Sperrfechter and Isabel Vogler, *Coordinating China and DAC development partners: challenges to the aid architecture in Rwanda*, DIE study 57 (Bonn: German Development Institute, 2011).

⁸³ The 1818 Society, *Key challenges facing the World Bank President: an independent diagnostic* (Washington DC: The 1818 Society, 2012).

security concerns in IR. What has not emerged strongly enough from these or other issue areas is a productive dialogue between substantive Africa-focused research on the one hand, and theoretical reflection and development in IR on the other. As Cornelissen, Cheru and Shaw argue, it is not only mainstream IR that is guilty here; ‘scholars dedicated to the study of Africa’s international politics have interrogated the deeper theoretical aspects of the continent’s position in the international system in only very limited senses’.⁸⁴ We highlight three challenges for those engaged in African studies in its broadest sense and those working in IR, which together might contribute to a renewed agenda for Africa and IR.

The first challenge—by no means exclusive to African studies—is to find ways to handle the tensions that arise between abstract universals and the empirical complexity of the continent’s international relations. This does entail, as noted above, an attempt to use existing models for African contexts in order to explore their limits. However, it also requires subsequent reflection upon the models themselves. As Katharina Coleman argues, ‘given the highly dynamic nature of African politics, all conceptual constructs—Western or otherwise—should be reassessed over time to determine whether they continue to be useful’.⁸⁵ There are examples in the literature of this kind of iterative work—Beth Whitaker’s work on ‘soft balancing’ and Danielle Beswick’s exploration of ‘omnibalancing’ are two good examples operating in the core field of mainstream IR, both of which use the lessons of African international relations to inform theoretical reflection.⁸⁶ Perhaps two other areas in particular stand out as ripe for such attention. One is the more careful scrutiny of the assumptions which lie behind the core concepts of IR theory. Here, IR assumptions about the similarity of state form have done much to lay the ground for the criticisms surveyed above. Ideas that states are ‘like units’, or are liberal in form, need to be validated, or more likely modified, before subsequent hypotheses can be easily applied in Africa. Some versions of liberalism and Marxism—though by no means all—here steal a march on neo-realism. Second, in order for a productive engagement between IR and Africa to take place, rigid prescriptions about which issues matter most need to be reassessed. Traditional, security-dominated issue hierarchies in IR have been under challenge for some time, and consideration of Africa in IR adds further weight to this trend. As Shaw and his colleagues argue, and as our survey has suggested, the agenda for African IR is a broad one that encompasses traditional foreign policy and defence as well as new and ‘transnational’ processes of interaction across states and regions.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Cornelissen et al., ‘Introduction: Africa and IR in the 21st century’. It is also notable that even in South Africa, the African country with by far the most developed tradition in IR scholarship, the majority of published work has an empirical focus, with very few articles, even in IR journals, addressing ‘purely theoretical’ questions. See Maxi Schoeman, ‘South Africa: between history and a hard place’, in Tickner and Waever, eds, *International Relations scholarship around the world*, pp. 62–3.

⁸⁵ Coleman, ‘Innovations in “African solutions to African problems”’, p. 541.

⁸⁶ Beth Whitaker, ‘Soft balancing among weak states? Evidence from Africa’, *International Affairs* 86: 5, Sept. 2010, pp. 1109–27; Danielle Beswick, ‘From weak state to savvy international player? Rwanda’s multi-level strategy for maximising agency’, in Brown and Harman, eds, *African agency in international politics* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2013).

⁸⁷ Shaw et al., ‘Conclusion: what futures for Africa’s international relations?’.

A second challenge, for scholars of Africa and IR theorists alike, is to make the role of African political actors analytically more central. Within African studies, reflection on the position of Africa in the international system (whether in relation to issues of intervention or in relation to the role of international institutions and norms) tends to overemphasize the domination of the continent by external actors. As the examples of China and HIV/AIDS show, the majority of research analyses how international politics and the interests of external parties play out on the continent, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, casting Africa as a passive recipient of such influence. Within IR, particularly in work that is developing a thesis not directly focused on Africa or the developing world, the tendency is to use stereotypical images of Africa to prop up descriptions of some defective corner of the states system. Works emphasizing quasi- and failed states,⁸⁸ pre-modern states,⁸⁹ coming anarchies⁹⁰ or clashing civilizations⁹¹ have all had their influence on western foreign policies, and all drag Africa onto the stage only to dismiss it as an undifferentiated exemplar of the more disorderly areas of the international system. Though very different in orientation, what both African studies and IR scholars achieve is a marginalization of African actors, African initiative and African choices.

However, between the alternatives prevalent in African studies and IR there is scope for exploration of new spaces and opportunities for increased African activity within these issue areas. Agency has been constrained and operated in tight corners,⁹² but African actors are not and have never been passive. The priority here is to look for sources of such agency, the particularities of agency in the context of Africa, and the wider implications of such findings for how we understand influence in international politics. Starting from the position that Africa is just a space in which external forces operate obscures the intricacies and differences of expressions of power in international negotiation and political processes, and places too deterministic an emphasis on structural forces. Structural social and economic forces undoubtedly have significant influence on the region, as they do on all regions of the world to a greater or lesser degree, in historically different and diverse ways. However, a focus on structure without a more detailed consideration or acknowledgement of agency binds Africa's international relations into a narrow and predetermined position as the recipient of international affairs rather than an active player. Both African studies and IR would benefit from a rethink.

Finally, for this engagement to be a productive one that can overcome inherited western biases in IR, African studies scholars, IR specialists and journals, and policy-makers all need to address problems of knowledge production itself.

⁸⁸ Jackson, *Quasi-states*.

⁸⁹ Georg Sørensen, *Changes in statehood: the transformation of international relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Robert Cooper, *The breaking of nations: order and chaos in the twenty-first century* (London: Atlantic Books, 2004).

⁹⁰ Robert Kaplan, 'The coming anarchy: how scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism, and disease are rapidly destroying the social fabric of our planet', *Atlantic Monthly* 273: 2, Feb. 1994, pp. 44–77.

⁹¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

⁹² John Lonsdale, 'Agency in tight corners: narrative and initiative in African history', *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 13: 1, 2000, pp. 5–16.

In from the margins?

Western academia remains massively dominant in the production of current IR research, especially that of a more theoretical nature.⁹³ A number of factors to do with resources, access to networks, subject fit and academic gatekeeping contribute to this bias. Within Africa itself there is a wide disparity between South Africa, the locale for the best-resourced higher education and prominent think-tank-based research, and the rest of the continent. And within the South African IR community itself there remain significant inequalities.⁹⁴ Such problems are not easily addressed and go well beyond the remit of this article,⁹⁵ but need to be attended to nonetheless.

Conclusion: in from the margins

Africa is at the core of empirical understandings of international relations but often at the periphery of theoretical insights. By the same token, IR theoretical tools remain peripheral to much scholarship on Africa. Bringing Africa in from the margins of how we think about international relations also requires a broader engagement with issue-specific research and greater reflection on what such empirical research says about international relations and the assumptions and concepts used to explain it. The result would be not 'a parochial new methodology totally detached from the rest of the world',⁹⁶ but a more informed dialogue between African realities and IR analytical constructs. Africa offers deep insights that challenge notions of the state and of governance, and liberal assumptions about the nature of the international system, and these insights would benefit the wider IR discipline as a whole. The growing nature of eastern political influence, and the coming together of eastern, western and African ideas on the continent, present a challenge to ideas and knowledge within the international system in which Africa is key both in the empirical and in the theoretical sense. We have argued that this changing canvas does not require a wholesale rewriting of contemporary international thought, but does present a challenge to how we use and adapt such theories, and judge their relevance and applicability. Meeting such analytical challenges would not only assist the development of the discipline of IR but would also help to address oversights within the policy arena of external actors and international institutions.

⁹³ Shaw et al., 'Conclusion: what futures for Africa's international relations?'

⁹⁴ Schoeman, 'South Africa: between history and a hard place'; Chris Landsberg and Dumisani Hlophe, 'The triple black burden: race, knowledge production and South Africa's international affairs', *Politikon* 8: 1, 2001, pp. 23–39.

⁹⁵ Though see British Academy and Association of Commonwealth Universities, *The Nairobi Report: frameworks for Africa–UK research collaboration in the social sciences and humanities* (London: British Academy, 2009).

⁹⁶ Cirino Hiteng Ofuho, 'Africa: teaching IR where it's not supposed to be', in Tickner and Waever, eds, *International Relations scholarship around the world*, pp. 71–85.

