

# **Challenging the State in Africa**

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### **Abstract**

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The issue of state failure has been the subject of much critical and popular attention in the face of widespread human misery in Africa. The failure of the state to either protect or enhance the lives of African peoples has led to urgent calls for 'state building' and 'state renewal'. Surprisingly, however, state failure has not led to serious critical interrogations of the suitability of the state itself as an institution of governance in different (non-European) contexts. In the discourse of international relations in general and African studies in particular, there is a widespread failure to imagine alternative models of political community or governance. With a few important exceptions, the state has remained the unquestioned point of departure for responses to the 'African crisis'. This paper seeks to explain these discourses in terms of a normalising project in which the 'anomalous' African state is made a target of remedial interventions from the international community. It suggests that the discourse of the state reconfigures rather than disassembles colonial power relations and that more attention needs to be paid to indigenous models of political community and governance in the African continent.

### **The 'Failed State' as a Discourse**

There are severe limitations to analyses that pose the African state as anomalous. Preconceived Western notions of the inevitability of the state underpin most academic studies of African politics. These notions tend to limit the scope of investigation to merely comparison (with the European state), and fail to take into account the historical and contemporary realities of African politics. This paper examines the normative background of claims commonly made regarding the African state, and suggests that they can be seen as part of a project of normalisation that constitutes a reconfiguration of colonial power relations.

The literature on state failure in Africa, rather than meaningfully questioning the viability or legitimacy of the state in Africa, establishes a very clear picture of the African state as anomalous. This anomaly has been described in many ways. For some there is a failure to instil sufficient collective identity amongst the territorial population. Others perceive the anomaly as a democratic deficit, in structure or spirit. A third group see the problem as a failure to maintain internal sovereignty. Ultimately, the literature uses the concept of an anomalous state, in the guise of a 'weak' or 'failed' state, to explain why governance and

political community in Africa have been so fraught with problems, and caused so much human suffering.<sup>1</sup>

There is a distinct lack of political imagination in such discussions of the African state, and this suggests that the impact of the Western discourses of governance and political community have a strong and demonstrable influence on the academic discourse of state failure in Africa. It can be argued that these Western discourses are so powerful as to make any attempt at alternative forms of governance or political community extremely difficult. This is reflected in the severe limitations of the ideas and vocabulary utilised in studies of state failure. By virtue of background assumptions rooted in Western discourses, both philosophical and material, the state has established itself in intellectual circles as an inescapable point of reference and standard of evaluation. At the same time as disavowing the state in the African context, academics writing on state failure have reinforced it. The discourse of state failure, which sets the African state up as an anomaly in an otherwise

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the key writers contributing to this conclusion include: **Debiel, T** (2000) "Do Crisis Regions Have a Chance of Lasting Peace? The Difficult Transformation from Structures of Violence". In Debiel, T and Klein, A (eds) *Fragile Peace: State Failure, Violence and Development in Crisis Regions*. Zed Books, London.; **Deng, F** (2000) "Reconciling Sovereignty with Responsibility: A Basis for International Humanitarian Action". In Harbeson, J W and Rothchild, D (eds) *Africa in World Politics: The African State System in Flux, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed*, Westview Press, New York.; **Harbeson, J W** (2000) "Externally Assisted Democratization: Theoretical Issues and African Realities". In Harbeson, J W and Rothchild, D (eds) *Africa in World Politics: The African State System in Flux, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed*, Westview Press, New York.; **Herbst, J** (1999) "The Role of Citizenship Laws in Multiethnic Societies: Evidence from Africa". In Joseph, R (ed.) *State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder.; **Hyden, G** (1999) "Governance and the Reconstitution of Political Order". In Joseph, R. (ed.) *State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder.; **Jackson, R** (1990) *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.; **Joseph, R** (ed.) (1999) *State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., Boulder.; **Leis, P E** (1995) "Ethnic Conflict, History and State Formation in Africa". In Goldscheider, C (ed.) *Population, Ethnicity and Nation-Building*. Westview Press, Boulder, Oxford, San Francisco.; **Mamdani, M** (1996) *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.; **Ndulo, M** (2002) "Democratic Governance and the Roots of Conflict in Africa". In Giannakos, S A (ed.) *Ethnic Conflict: Religion, Identity and Politics*. Ohio University Press, Athens.; **Olukoshi, A** (1999) "State, Conflict, and Democracy in Africa: The Complex Process of Renewal". In Joseph, R (ed.) *State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder.; **Ottoway, M** (1995) "Democratization in Collapsed States". In Zartman, I W (ed. ) *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder and London.; **Reno, W** (2000) "Africa's Weak States: Nonstate Actors, and the Privatisation of Interstate Relations". In Harbeson, J W and Rothchild, D (eds) *Africa in World Politics: The African State System in Flux, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed*, Westview Press, New York.; **Villalón, L A** (1998) "The African State at the End of the Twentieth Century: Parameters of the Critical Juncture". In Villalón, L A and Huxtable, P A (eds) *The African State at a Critical Juncture: Between Disintegration and Reconfiguration*. Lynne Reiner Publishers, Boulder and London.; **Zack-Williams, A B** (2004) "Africa and the Project of Modernity: Some Reflections". In Uduko, O and Zack-Williams, A B (eds) *Africa Beyond the Post-Colonial: Political and Socio-Cultural Identities*. Ashgate, Hampshire and Burlington.; **Zartman, I W** (1995) "Posing the Problem of State Collapse". In Zartman, I W (ed.) *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder and London.

normal international system of states, obscures much more fundamental questions of the legitimacy and viability of the state in Africa.

This paper aims to draw out the ways in which these fundamental questions are avoided, and the consequences of this avoidance. The paper begins by challenging the methodology adopted by many writers in African Studies on the basis that they resort to ‘history by analogy’, rather than analysing African politics in its own right. This is then followed by an exploration of the Foucauldian notions of deviance and normalisation and argues that these notions are at work in the posing of the African state as anomalous, and the ensuing recommendations that the African state be renewed in line with the European model.

### **Methodology: History by Analogy**

There are many writers in African Studies who work on historical and contemporary analysis of African politics, and recommendations on how to meet the challenges faced by African governance. Olukoshi has argued that

[African social scientists] have expressed profound disquiet not only at the ease with which definitive conclusions, built on weak evidence, poor understanding and shaky methodologies, are drawn about developments in Africa, but also about the dizzying array of terminologies, most of them of doubtful analytical value, that are invented as quickly as they are discarded to “explain” every twist and turn in the transitional process that is unfolding on the continent.<sup>2</sup>

Olukoshi and others are concerned about the methodology adopted by academics in this field.<sup>3</sup> With undoubtedly good intentions, academics have attempted to construct theories to explain the continued failure of the state in Africa, with a view to addressing this failure by repairing the state in order to pave the way for the continent’s ‘renewal’. However, as Olukoshi points out, there are some serious flaws in the methodology used to develop these theories.

As well as often relying on questionable evidence and poor understandings, most writers have adopted a methodology guilty of what Mamdani calls ‘history by analogy’. When discussing

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<sup>2</sup> Olukoshi, A Op. cit. p.455.

<sup>3</sup> Engel, U and Mehler, A (2005) “‘Under Construction’: Governance in Africa’s New Violent Social Spaces”. In Engel, U and Olsen, G R (eds) *The African Exception*. Ashgate, Hants and Burlington. pp.90-91.; Mustapha, A R (2002) “States, Predation & Violence: Reconceptualizing Political Action and Political Community in Africa”. Paper presented at 10th General Assembly of CODESRIA, Kampala, Uganda. p.1.; Vale, P (2004) “New Ways to Remember...’: Community in Southern Africa”. *International Relations* 18(1):73-89. p.79.

Africanist approaches to the study of African history and politics, Mamdani claims that “[w]hatever their differences, [all] sides agree that African reality has meaning only insofar as it can be seen to reflect a particular stage in the development of an earlier [European] history.”<sup>4</sup> This suggests that the claim that all the world’s people would develop in the same pattern as Europe, the thesis of modernisation theory, maintains a covert presence in this literature. Approaches which aim simply to position one community’s history at a particular point in Europe’s history have long been acknowledged as problematic in postcolonial literature.<sup>5</sup>

In particular, this kind of approach privileges nation-state centred analyses. As Rasenjit Duara argues, analysis of Africa’s history and contemporary politics places so much emphasis on the state because Europe’s historical experience has largely been packaged in this form, or more specifically, in the form of the nation-state.<sup>6</sup> Duara explains that by occlusion, repression and appropriation, a nation-state centred, ‘history by analogy’ approach impedes valuable analysis in a number of ways.<sup>7</sup>

Firstly, such an approach limits the subject of history to the nation-state, thereby obscuring other forms of resistance and politics that operate in a non-nation-state form, in both historical and contemporary contexts. In fact the representation of history, and thought in general, is a “battleground of power”.<sup>8</sup> In this context, a multitude of factors and players fight for representation and inclusion in studies of what is meaningful in a community’s political universe. This includes fighting for recognition that in some contexts, the nation is not the most meaningful identity marker or boundary for a political community.

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<sup>4</sup> Mamdani, M Op. cit. p.12.

<sup>5</sup> Chatterjee, P (1986) *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, Zed Books Ltd., Avon. p.3.; Duara, R (1995) *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.; Gandhi, L (1998) *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards. pp.170-171.; Hindess, B (2001) “The Liberal Government of Unfreedom”. *Alternative*, 26:93-111. p.105.; Loomba, A (1998) *Colonialism / Postcolonialism*, Routledge, London and New York. pp.249-254.

<sup>6</sup> Though this is not to say that the nation-state has always been an uncontested norm in Europe or the wider Western world. For a critique of the evolution of the nation-state model in Europe see Canefe, N (1996) “Sovereignty Without Nationalism? A Critical Assessment of Minority Rights beyond the Sovereign Nation-State Model”. In Sellers, M (ed.) *The New World Order: Sovereignty, Human Rights and the Self-Determination of Peoples*. Berg, Oxford and Washington D.C.

<sup>7</sup> Duara, R Op. cit. p.5.

<sup>8</sup> Chatterjee, P Op. cit. p.10.

The second way in which history by analogy poses severe limitations on analysis of the African nation-state is that it impedes useful analysis of Africa's experience of the nation-state. Though this paper has argued that other elements of African politics deserve more historical and analytical attention, there is no doubt that the nation-state, rightly or wrongly, has played a large part in Africa's recent history. Consequently, it too deserves scholarly attention. Nevertheless, the attention granted thus far, precisely because it has been anchored in Western experience, has tended towards a search for repetition of experiences encountered by the European nation-state, rather than exploring how the nation-state is experienced in Africa. Analysis of the African state to date has deemed it anomalous. Nevertheless, "[i]ts seeming eccentricity or inexplicability or unpredictability has existed only in the eyes of those who have not really looked."<sup>9</sup> Searching simply for evidence of how the state in Africa stands up against preconceived notions and histories of a 'normal' state necessarily restricts, to a severe degree, what can be taken into account in analysis of Africa's experience of the nation-state.

It is difficult to make sense of the African experience of politics with the mainstream approach of Africanists. Nevertheless, this is obscured by the fact that it is easy to make it *appear* sensible by drawing analogies which most Western readers will understand. This inevitably involves excluding events, trends, underlying values, recurring principles, meanings and sentiments that cannot be explained without reference to Europe or its experience of the nation-state, but which are undoubtedly crucial to a dynamic and useful understanding of African politics.

### **Deviance and Normalisation**

The methodology described by Mamdani as 'history by analogy', as well as having analytical shortcomings, has some serious normative limitations. To explore this proposition further, it is helpful to draw on Foucault's conceptions of power, deviance and normalisation. In effect, analysis of contemporary Africa from the perspective of the failed state, and the promulgation of recommendations to somehow 'repair' the state can be seen as constituting a project of normalisation of forms of governance and political community.

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<sup>9</sup> Davidson, B (1992) *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State*, Times Books, New York. p.63.

In his work Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, Foucault developed the notions of deviance and normalisation to the point where they have become useful concepts in almost every field of social inquiry, including politics and history.<sup>10</sup> In this work, Foucault explores the phenomenon of characterising criminals as ‘deviants’, and the ensuing process of normalisation using the disciplinary technology of the modern prison.

Foucault’s idea that deviance, or abnormality, is a construct rather than a description is useful in the context of African politics, and the discourse of state failure in Africa. In particular it allows us to view the designation of the African state as ‘anomalous’ through a theoretical lens that can help explain how this designation has arisen and been so widely adopted in thought and practice. However, first a more comprehensive explanation of normalisation is required.

It is important to recognise that, for Foucault, the deviant is not objectively identified as such, but is rather the product of a society’s norms. Hence, any individual who does not adhere to these norms is identified as deviant: “[t]he nonconformist, even the temporary one, became the object of disciplinary attention.”<sup>11</sup> Such a nonconformist is then subject to the discipline of the prison system, which is a system of “hierarchical observation and normalizing judgement”.<sup>12</sup> The aim of the discipline is to “cure, or educat[e] – supervise, transform, correct and improve”.<sup>13</sup> Punishment aims to “transform the recalcitrant into the dutiful”.<sup>14</sup> Foucault’s thesis is that “prisons didn’t so much fail to eliminate crime as succeed in producing delinquency – to distinguish the normal and abnormal and to use them to demonstrate subjection.”<sup>15</sup>

The distinction between normal and abnormal, and the discipline that ensues, occur through power/knowledge formations. Discipline requires the collection of knowledge about the object concerned (hierarchical observation), for example the prisoner, and the use of this knowledge to determine the ways in which the object differs from the norm (normalising

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<sup>10</sup> Foucault, M (1979) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by A Sheridan, Penguin, Harmondsworth.

<sup>11</sup> Dreyfus, H L and Rabinow, P (1982) *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago. p.158.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 156.

<sup>13</sup> Merquior, J G (1985) *Foucault*, Fontana Press, London. p.96.

<sup>14</sup> Dreyfus, H L and Rabinow, P Op. cit. p.152.

<sup>15</sup> Merquior, J G Op. cit. p.95-96.

judgement). The collection of knowledge feeds power relations by enabling normalising judgement, but it also requires power relations to enable the accumulation of knowledge. In this sense, power and knowledge are not separate, but rather “a knot that is not meant to be unravelled.”<sup>16</sup> The two then act together to discipline the deviant through the internalization by the deviant of the prevailing norm.

This disciplinary process: the production and transformation of delinquency or deviance, is otherwise known as normalisation, and extends well beyond the prison.<sup>17</sup> Society in general operates according to certain rules and norms which can be recast in Foucauldian terms as disciplinary technologies. These technologies encourage the internalisation of these norms. Relations of power play a central role in the establishment of these norms and the disciplinary technologies that sustain them. The norms in turn sustain these relations of power. The pervasion of these norms through discipline is what is meant by normalisation.

### **Normalisation and the Nation-State**

Foucault’s development of the concepts of deviance and normalisation referred to individuals as subjects. It is possible, however, to extrapolate these concepts and apply them to different kinds of subjects, in particular, institutions and practices of governance and political community.<sup>18</sup> This leap involves the recognition that institutions and practices of government have been made objects in a particular discourse: the discourse of state failure. According to Foucault, areas of investigation are established as objects when power relations establish them as such. Through this process they become knowable objects, intelligible within the discourse in which they are investigated.<sup>19</sup> The academic literature on state failure can thus be understood as constituting the institutions and practices of governance in Africa, in the form of the state, as knowable objects in the discourse of ‘state failure’.

In this discourse, the modern nation-state, on the European model, constitutes the norm in both a statistical and moral sense.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, all practices of governance are discussed and analysed on national terms, and judged on the ability of the state to construct a national

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<sup>16</sup> Simons, J (1995) *Foucault and the Political*, Routledge, London and New York. p.27.

<sup>17</sup> Merquior, J G Op. cit. pp.95-96.

<sup>18</sup> Stamp, P (1997) “Pastoral Powers: Foucault and the New Imperial Order”. In O’Farrell, C (ed.) *Foucault: The Legacy*. Queensland University of Technology, Kelvin Grove.; Zanutti, L (2006) “Taming chaos: A Foucauldian view of UN Peacekeeping, Democracy and Normalization”. *International Peacekeeping* 13(2):150-167.

<sup>19</sup> Simons, J Op. cit. p.27.

<sup>20</sup> The notion of norms having both statistical and moral aspects is drawn from Simons. Ibid. p.31.

collective identity, to maintain sufficient democratic credentials in structure and behaviour, and to uphold both internal and external sovereignty. A national community is believed to be necessary to maintain the cohesion required for the material and subjective stability of the national political community. Democracy and the state are believed to be mutually dependent. A strong state is believed to be one which is democratically responsive to the needs of its citizens, particularly their security needs. Thus elections, constitutions, citizenship, effective institutional checks and balances on power and a democratic ethos are believed to be preconditions for peace and prosperity. The state is believed to be responsible for maintaining a monopoly on the forms of violence, and for the pervasion of law and order throughout a territorially defined population. This is the justification for the pervasion of the norm of the nation-state, and it is in this sense that it can be understood as something of a 'moral law'.

Following a teleological mode of analysis, states (and only states, other forms of governance are not objects in this discourse) which steer a different course to those of Europe, and particularly those states which it seems are irredeemably 'off-course', are deemed deviant or anomalous. Mamdani claims that "[i]n the event that a real-life performance [does not] correspond to the prescribed trajectory, it [is] understood as a deviation."<sup>21</sup> The 'failed states' of Africa fit this category because of their perceived failure to construct a national collective identity, to maintain sufficient democratic credentials in structure and behaviour, and to uphold both internal and external sovereignty. The perceived inevitability of the state, what we can now call the 'normalcy' of the state, forces the conclusion that these failures are the result of an inability or unwillingness of African people to govern 'appropriately'. It is this perception that spawns anomalous terms such as 'quasi-state', 'shadow-state', 'bifurcated-state', 'fictive-state', 'weak state' and 'failed state', and sets these states up as objects for normalisation.<sup>22</sup>

The disciplinary technologies involved in the process of normalisation are various. These 'technologies' are largely well-intentioned, however they rest on an unacknowledged normative base that needs to be challenged. Surveillance and knowledge are central to the disciplinary process, and such knowledge feeds and is fed by power, to transform 'deviant'

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<sup>21</sup> Mamdani, M Op. cit. p.9.

<sup>22</sup> 'Quasi-state' derives from Jackson, R Op. cit.; 'Shadow state' derives from Reno, W (2000) Op. cit.; 'Bifurcated state' derives from Mamdani, M Op. cit.; 'Fictive state' derives from Zack-Williams, A B Op. cit.

forms of governance. It has been argued that both foreign aid and peacekeeping are particularly modern, and late twentieth century or early twenty-first century technologies of discipline that affect the state in Africa.<sup>23</sup> Both these practices go about accumulating immense amounts of information about the governance of African ‘nations’ with the aim of transforming and ordering them according to Western models. Examples of the tools used to acquire such knowledge include the Human Development Index, statistics on conflict-related deaths, IMF economic surveillance or on a less global and recognisable scale, project plans and reports compiled for ‘development’ projects. In addition to these more policy oriented modes of surveillance, there exists a proliferation of academic studies of African constitutional types, citizenship laws, electoral procedures and sovereign capacities. These modes of investigation gather data on individual states, and group them together in comparative projects.<sup>24</sup>

These types of knowledge accumulation in part constitute power/knowledge formations, and “...can be seen in Foucauldian terms as an instance of the carceralization of international order.”<sup>25</sup> From Laura Zanotti’s perspective, the practice and monitoring of peacekeeping programs transform the international order into a mode of incarceration for states that ‘require’ peace keepers, that is, states who do not adhere to the norm. The same conclusion can be drawn for the other modes of knowledge accumulation described. Development projects, economic evaluation and academic studies all diagnose flaws in and prescribe solutions for the African state, rendering it much like a prisoner to Western norms. Zanotti rightly points out that carceralisation does not usually *result* in the normalisation of the states concerned, but rather only serves to increase the intensity with which they are monitored, and multiplies and magnifies the ways in which they can be deemed deviant. Indeed, Foucault argued that the deviance of some subjects is used to justify the policing of whole populations.<sup>26</sup> This is evident in the intense and constant surveillance of African states, justified in the academic literature, in Non-Governmental Organisation and other multi-lateral international institutions, by the perceived failure of *some* states.

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<sup>23</sup> Hindess, B (2003) “Responsibility for Others in the Modern System of States”. *Journal of Sociology* 39(1):23-30. p.26; La Branche, S (2005) “Abuse and Westernization: Reflections on Strategies of Power.” *Journal of Peace Research* 42(2):219-235.; Stamp, P Op. cit.; Zanotti, L Op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> For explicit examples see Herbst, J (1999) Op. cit.; Mozaffar, S (1999) “Cascading Interdependence, Democratisation, and Ethnic Conflict Management in Africa”. In Stock, J F Jr and Hebron, L (eds) *The Ethnic Entanglement: Conflict Intervention in World Politics*. Praeger Publishers, Westport.; Ndulo, M Op. cit.

<sup>25</sup> Zanotti, L Op. cit. p.163.

<sup>26</sup> Sheridan, A (1980) *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth*, Tavistock Publications, London and New York. p.161.

Barry Hindess argues that various forms of knowledge are used in various discourses to categorise subjects into different groups, depending on the degree to which it is believed they are transformable.<sup>27</sup> Those subjects which are believed to be incapable of transformation are deemed 'hopeless cases' and are simply cleared out of the way. The designation of Africa as a 'hopeless case' is manifest in Afro-pessimism, the belief, usually implicit rather than explicit, that nothing can be done to redeem Africa from its perceived position as the backward, hopeless continent. This position has been described as a "philosophy of despair",<sup>28</sup> and is to some degree behind the disturbingly widespread ignorance of African issues outside the continent, and lack of intellectual, political and economic energy spent in finding feasible, long-term solutions to Africa's problems. When Africa is seen in this light as a 'hopeless case', little disciplinary energy is applied to the state or its people.

However Africa is often viewed not as hopeless, but as a 'subject of improvement' to use another of Hindess' terms. It is when this view is taken that African states become the subjects of constant intervention and discipline, capitalising on the knowledge already accumulated to render these states deviant, and then using what can be seen as disciplinary mechanisms to normalise these forms of governance and political community. There exist vast fields of intervention in Africa, including economic, military and non-government programs. For example, there have been no less than 17 UN Peace-Keeping Missions in Africa since decolonisation, and a further eight currently on the ground.<sup>29</sup> This represents an unprecedented level of military 'intervention' in the continent. From an economic perspective, almost every Sub-Saharan African state has been subject to Structural Adjustment Programs instigated by the Bretton Woods Institutions.<sup>30</sup> These states have thus been subject to conditions aimed to strengthen the state (but prevent its interference in the market) through 'good governance' as defined by the World Bank, the creation of multiparty liberal democratic systems of government, and respect for basic human rights.<sup>31</sup> It is not difficult to see the similarities between these criteria and those commonly believed amongst Western academics to be hallmarks of a normal state, particularly the perceived need for

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<sup>27</sup> Hindess, B (2001) Op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> Mustapha, A R Op. cit. p.6.

<sup>29</sup> United Nations Peace Keeping Home Page, (2007), (Online), Available: [www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/](http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/) (18 October, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Clapham, C (1996) "Governmentality and Economic Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa". *Third World Quarterly* 17(4):809-824. p.812.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p.814.

states to be constitutionally democratic and sovereign. These programs represent only some of the political pressures applied to the continent through economic means. The non-government sector also plays a large intervening role in Africa. To name just a few well-known organisations, Oxfam International has a presence in 35 African countries under its 'development' remit, the International Committee of the Red Cross has a presence in 45 African countries, and Médecins Sans Frontières has a presence in 35 African countries.<sup>32</sup> Again, the scope of intervention suggested by these figures is significant.

The role of these networks of intervention in the westernisation or discipline of Africans and African governance has not gone unnoticed.<sup>33</sup> This particular brand of discipline has been described by some as therapeutisation.<sup>34</sup> Such a description resonates with the medical discourse adopted by many Africanists, who describe state failure using terms such as 'degenerative disease' and talk of 'cure' and 'remission'.<sup>35</sup> From this perspective, the pathology of the African state becomes clear, and Western remedies are applied in the ways described above. In addition, the therapeutic view acknowledges the psychological dimensions of state failure, and views projects such as reconciliation commissions as the promotion of individual healing with the goal of creating national cohesion and identity in post-conflict states in order to resurrect or build state legitimacy.<sup>36</sup> This analysis suggests that in order to renew the African state, disciplinary technologies can be applied not just to institutions and state actors, but to individuals in the population.

It would be simplistic to claim that practices such as peace-keeping, development programs, economic surveillance and academic studies serve only to discipline and westernise Africa, and this is not the claim being made here. Rather, highlighting the background assumptions of the discourse of state failure, and the extent of its practical implications, compels us to investigate further the discursive context in which these practices take place, and the desirability of their persistence. Inevitably every discourse does more than simply enable unpalatable disciplinary practices and shut off alternatives. Discourses also make possible

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<sup>32</sup> Oxfam International Programs, (2007), (Online), Available: [www.oxfam.org/en/programs/development/](http://www.oxfam.org/en/programs/development/) (18 October, 2007).; International Committee of the Red Cross, (2007), (Online), Available: [www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/africa?OpenDocument](http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/africa?OpenDocument) (18 October, 2007).; Médecins Sans Frontières African Countries Page, (2007), (Online), Available: [www.msf.org/msfinternational/countries/africa/index.cfm](http://www.msf.org/msfinternational/countries/africa/index.cfm) (18 October, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Hindess, B (2003) Op. cit.; La Branche, S Op. cit.; Stamp, P Op. cit.; Zanotti, L Op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> Humphrey, M (2005) "Reconciliation and the Therapeutic State". *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 26(3):203-220.

<sup>35</sup> Zartman, I W Op. cit. p.8.

<sup>36</sup> Humphrey, M Op. cit. p.205.

more positive practices. What is being suggested here is that there is a need to examine in a more profound way to what extent the seemingly positive practices are, in fact, disciplinary and dominating, and what the costs are in terms of disabling alternative modes of politics. The patterns described in the academic literature, and in practices of economic, military and non-government intervention suggest an urgent need to review the discourse, its assumptions and its implications.

Indeed, it is possible to view the knowledge accumulation and disciplinary technologies described above as engendering and being engendered by a reconfiguration of colonial power relations.<sup>37</sup> The discourse of state failure is deeply embedded in Western discourses of governance and political community. Western understandings of these concepts are set up as the norm and when African states are surveilled and deemed deviant, they can become the object of normalising, Westernising, disciplinary projects. This can be seen in the insistence on the renewal of the state in accordance with three key areas: collective identity, democracy and sovereignty. These projects make it very difficult to establish alternatives to the Western norm, such as the alternatives to the nation-state called for by Herbst and Reno. Partha Chatterjee argues that to ask why no alternative has been offered to the nation-state in postcolonial contexts is to pose the problem within a discourse of *power*:

It is to raise the possibility that it is not just military might, or industrial strength, but thought itself, which can dominate and subjugate. It is to approach the field of discourse, historical, philosophical and scientific, as a battleground of political power.

From such a perspective, the problem of nationalist thought becomes the particular manifestation of a much more general problem, namely, the problem of the bourgeois-rationalist conception of knowledge, established in the post-Enlightenment period of European intellectual history, as the moral and epistemic foundation for a supposedly universal framework of thought which perpetuates, in a real and not merely a metaphorical sense, a colonial domination. It is a

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<sup>37</sup> It has also been argued that Africa has been subject to neo-colonial power relations through their marginalized and dependent status in the global economy (Callaghy, T M (2000) "Africa and the World Political Economy: More caught between a Rock and a Hard Place". In Harbeson, J W and Rothchild, D (eds) *Africa in World Politics: The African State System in Flux*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, Westview Press, New York.; Hoogvelt, A (2002) "Globalisation, Imperialism and Exclusion: The Case of Sub-Saharan Africa". In Zack-Williams, T, Frost, D and Thomson, A (eds) *Africa in Crisis: New Challenges and Possibilities*. Pluto Press, London, Sterling and Virginia.). A more sophisticated argument uses Foucault's notion of governmentality to analyse the ways in which markets discipline individuals and states into certain kinds of behaviour and subjectivity. See Dean, M (1999) *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, Delhi. Given the intimate connection between politics and economics, this would be an interesting avenue of research to pursue, however it is beyond the scope of this paper to do so here.

framework of knowledge which proclaims its own universality; its validity, it pronounces, is independent of cultures.<sup>38</sup>

By recognising that knowledge is ‘a battleground of political power’, Chatterjee enables a critical judgement regarding the terms in this battle. The ‘knowledge’ involved in the discourse of state failure is twofold. Firstly, there is the proclaimed knowledge of what is ‘normal’, that is, a nation-state with a cohesive national community, strong democratic credentials, and which upholds internal sovereignty. This knowledge is based on what Chatterjee calls ‘bourgeois-rational thought’, with its moral and epistemic roots in the European Enlightenment and modernity.<sup>39</sup> Secondly, there is the knowledge of the ways in which the African state deviates from these criteria, accumulated through various academic studies, development programs, economic surveillance, peace-keeping operations, and other similar projects.

These power relations are evident in the link between the two types of knowledge described above. Foucault conceived of the link between knowledge about an individual, and knowledge of a population, as normalising judgement.<sup>40</sup> This can be applied to the discourse of state failure, as knowledge of the functioning of individual African states is connected to knowledge of a ‘normal’ state through the judgment that the African state is somehow anomalous. It is in this way that knowledge constructs the anomalous state. Sanjay Seth has said that

...precisely because knowledge is not just a matter of knowing an object ‘out there’, but also a way of construing and constructing that object, the privileging of nation and state normalizes and authorizes certain expression of particularity, and pathologizes others.<sup>41</sup>

The discourse of state failure plays more than merely a descriptive or analytic role in African politics. There is, in fact, a very tight connection between knowledge and normalisation. The kinds of knowledge described above influence this field in a very real way, as is evidenced by the numerous and diverse disciplinary technologies applied to the continent in an attempt to achieve a regional community of sovereign, democratic nation-states. By

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<sup>38</sup> Chatterjee, P Op. cit. p.10.

<sup>39</sup> See also La Branche, S Op. cit. p.229.

<sup>40</sup> Rouse, J (1994) “Power/Knowledge”. In Gutting, G (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York and Melbourne. p.98.

<sup>41</sup> Seth, S (2000) “A 'Postcolonial World?'”. In Fry, G and O’Hagan, J (eds) *Contending Images of World Politics*. MacMillan, Hampshire and London. p.225.

analysing the discourse of state failure and its underlying assumptions, we are able to see that these assumptions are somewhat disturbing in the superior status they give to Western forms of knowledge. What are even more disturbing are the practical effects the discourse enables: Afro-pessimism or vast networks of intervention and discipline. It is therefore crucial to illuminate this discourse for what it is: a configuration of power that provides the impetus for a project of normalisation. In other words, this discourse, which claims to theorise, or 'know', what has gone wrong with the African state, is in fact pathologising it.

## **Conclusion**

The discourse of state failure and the anomalous African state relies on certain underlying assumptions about governance and political community that are deeply anchored in Western political theory and practice. The discourse is able to make the claim that the African state is anomalous only by resorting to an analytical methodology of 'history by analogy', which situates Africa at an earlier point in Europe's history, rather than taking into account the events, trends, underlying values, recurring principles, meanings and sentiments that constitute Africa's own, unique political culture. This kind of methodology can be illuminated as normatively flawed by viewing it as part of a project of normalisation of African forms of governance and political community. The designation of the African state as deviant is justified through the accumulation and utilisation of certain kinds of knowledge in disciplinary technologies, a process made possible by, and making possible, a particular form of power relations. The result of such a discourse is either a dangerous form of Afro-pessimism, or constant intervention and discipline. These power relations can be viewed as a reconfiguration of colonial power relations, and are therefore deeply problematic. This discourse is in need of challenging if Africa is to be free to establish its own forms of governance and political community.

The question of how to move forward from this point is a difficult one. An exploration of alternative discourses about governance and political community would be an appropriate starting point, though not one free of risk. Particularly in the African context, the exploration of more indigenous alternatives will cause many to fear the revival of violent, patriarchal or other largely undesirable forms of political organisation. Inevitably alternative discourses will also involve relations of power and domination, and so this is indeed a situation of which we should be wary. Nevertheless, the opening up of discourse is an important step. In the words of Zygmunt Bauman "[n]ot asking certain questions is pregnant with more dangers

than failing to answer the questions already on the official agenda; while asking the wrong kind of questions all too often helps to avert eyes from the truly important issues.”<sup>42</sup> With this warning in mind, the hope of this paper is that it has begun a process of opening up of discourses about governance and political community to positions other than the dominant nation-state one, attached as it is to such a questionable normative power base.

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<sup>42</sup> Bauman, Z (1998) *Globalisation: The Human Consequences*, Columbia University Press, New York. p.5.

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