1 Three Theoretical Spurts

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Theory is what guides research. Without it, there would be no organized knowledge to divide into disciplines, fields, or sub-fields. Theory is built on symbolic representations called concepts or, usually, constructs when referring to something abstract, like regime or state. It becomes the lens through which we acquire knowledge about such key variables as political behaviour, choice, and performance. Theory in the social sciences, however, is not written in stone and undergoes change as it is continuously being tested in new research. This allows us to appreciate the dynamic but also volatile nature of our subject matter, politics. It reminds us of the challenges that exist in our ambition to enhance the growth of a body of accepted scientific knowledge. Political science is not like the physical sciences where researchers can hang on to one and the same theory, or paradigm, until something earth-shaking occurs. This gives physicists plenty of time to solve puzzles within a single and common theoretical frame. They can enjoy long periods of "normal science". Questioning the dominant theory in the hard sciences is risky and associated with possible ostracism. (Those who take the risk, however, stand the biggest chance of earning a Nobel Prize!)

Social scientists share the ambition of accumulating knowledge through the use of scientific theory, but because politics is unpredictable, stabilizing the generation of knowledge by hanging on to a single theory has its limits. Anomalies that challenge a dominant theory are many (Geddes 2010). Periods of pursuing normal science, therefore, tend to become short. Alternative theories lie waiting around

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the corner. This tension between constancy and renewal has been and still is a prominent feature of Comparative Politics. It becomes especially evident in an Africanist perspective. Because generalizations are derived from theories meant to highlight what is an already "developed" or "democratic" society, Africa, still developing and democratizing, demonstrates features that make it different in comparison not only with Western Europe and North America but also with other regions such as Latin America and Eastern Europe. The political issue in Africa is not the backsliding experience of countries with a democratic tradition. Instead, it is how to build democracy in a context where its benefits were denied to the local population by the colonial administrators. This chapter is devoted to highlighting how social scientists have built theoretical constructs with the aim of strengthening the comparative analysis of politics.

1.2 THREE THEORETICAL BREAKTHROUGHS

The literature on African politics has been driven by two main concerns: (1) to find its place in the pantheon of mainstream theories and (2) to highlight its innate dynamics. The two do not come together easily: the first fosters a search for generalities, the second for empirical manifestations in local space. This tension is striking when examining how African politics has been approached in Comparative Politics since it was founded in the middle of the last century. This examination shows a back-and-forth movement between an emphasis on theoretical integration, on the one hand, and fresh empirical insights and alternative theoretical explanations, on the other. The former has driven the discipline's development while the latter has served as its corrective. Because politics is not inanimate, theory in the social sciences invites constant reassessment. This chapter will render the story of how the study of African politics has fared in this process.

As indicated in the Introduction, it is possible to identify three theoretical spurts in Comparative Politics that have shaped its evolution: (1) structural functionalism in the 1960s, (2) rational choice

theory in the 1980s, and (3) democratic theory in the 2000s. Each one has been an attempt to redefine the field in response to changes in global politics. Each of these spurts has had a major impact on the study of African politics. It is necessary, therefore, to begin with an account of these dominant theories and their particulars.

To begin, this table summary tells us quite a bit about Comparative Politics as a field of study in political science. First, for its own advancement it has gathered inspiration from neighbouring disciplines. Theories developed by anthropologists and sociologists helped transform political science in the 1960s when it abandoned an outdated institutionalism wedded to the study of laws and constitutions. Second, while there has been a continuous ambition to find a general or grand theory to explain political phenomena, the more striking impression is how widely the search for universality has been, covering structural as well as institutional and agency-based explanations. Third, it is not difficult to see that the high ambitions generated by each spurt have caused their own response in the form of critique and reconceptualization of the subject matter. The rest of this chapter will address these issues by elaborating on the contents of Table 1.1.

1.2.1 Structural Functionalism

The first generation of comparativists was especially ambitious in their attempt to develop a theory that could explain politics regardless of context. The structural-functionalist approach – which was developed in the late 1950s by a team of sociologists and political scientists, many with knowledge of different regions of the world, and articulated in an edited volume on the politics in developing areas (Almond and Coleman 1960) – treated the political system as an organism in which all parts were connected through their own feedback loops. Their challenge was how to conduct inquiries about societies for which a previously accumulated literature was lacking (Almond 1960). A good deal of attention was devoted to the elaboration of conceptual schemes that could lead to empirical investigations. This first

Table 1.1 *Three dominant theories in Comparative Politics, 1960–2020*

Variable/theory	Structural functionalism	Rational choice	Democratic theory
Academic origin	Anthropology/ sociology	Economics	Philosophy
Main objective	Demonstrate systems similarity	Make analysis parsimonious	Prove universality of democratic norms
Principal focus	Structures	Human agency	Institutions
Preferred method	Qualitative	Quantitative	Variable
Critique	Difficult to operationalize	Oversimplification	Neglect of inherent normativity

Source: Author

generation of comparativists sought inspiration in the Western intellectual tradition of thinking about the nature of social change (Shils 1963:11–12). The result was that functionalist theory became identified with the concept of modernization, which, in their view, treated democratic Western society as both the compass and the endpoint.

Structural functionalism initially generated a lot of enthusiasm, and some referred to it as the "new political science" or "the revolution in political science" (Easton 1969; Wiarda 2002). Those who were less excited soon identified weaknesses in the theory. Some pointed out the problematic nature of the theoretical scheme itself; others zeroed in on the contentious nature of the modernization concept. The former made two points. The first was the abstract nature of the theory and the difficulties related to operationalizing it. The second focused on the idea that structures are agents of their own, thus omitting the role that human agency plays in directing change through policy (Radcliffe Brown 1952; Durkheim 1953). The second line of criticism questioned the tendency in the theory to treat social

change – represented by the modernization concept – as a cluster of internally compatible variables that "keep the system going" regardless of challenges to its legitimacy. Samuel P. Huntington (1965) was one of the first to point out that if one unpacks the concept and treats selective aspects of it, for example, institutions, one finds that modernization may strengthen instead of weaken traditional institutions and values, and rapid social change in one sphere may serve only to inhibit change in another. This critique also directed attention to the notion that tradition and modernity represent two mutually exclusive and functionally interdependent clusters of attributes. Rudolph and Rudolph (1967) showed in their research in India that in many instances "traditional" institutions and values may facilitate rather than impede social change. Modernization, therefore, cannot be equated simply with the destruction of tradition because the latter is not a prerequisite of modernization (Tipps 1973). From an African perspective, scholars such as Rotberg and Mazrui (1970) and Mbembe (2001) have criticized the Western development paradigm using a post-colonial constructivist argumentation.

As structural functionalism ran out of intellectual steam, the gap was filled in Africanist research by monographs focusing on the challenges of nation-building and bringing back human agency to the analysis. Although the literature was more varied, two accounts stand out as significant milestones in the first generation of Africanist political science. Aristide Zolberg (1966) devoted his research to the issues of creating political order and showed why West African leaders preferred to use single-party rule to hold their country together. Concern about liberal democracy was largely absent in the Comparative Politics literature at the time. The focus was on how the new states could be held together while embarking on a national development agenda. The early political breakdown of the Democratic Republic of Congo (then referred to as Congo-Kinshasa) and, soon thereafter, the civil war in Nigeria lent weight to the importance of research along these lines. An edited volume on the first post-independence elections in Tanzania in 1965 provided interesting insights into how

political competition could be built into one-party rule by allowing two or more candidates to compete for the seat in each constituency (Cliffe 1967). This hybrid form of turning a primary into general election was later copied in other African countries, such as Kenya.

A second landmark study at the time focused on the cultural factors that helped in shaping the politics of national integration. Crawford Young's (1976) seminal book on the politics of cultural pluralism in Africa, based on his earlier research in Congo-Kinshasa, examined several African cases to show how modernization helped mobilize ethnic identities, especially in the growing urban centres across the continent. Much like the Rudolphs had argued with reference to India, Young empirically demonstrated that modernization was by no means a linear process but one characterized by contestation between communities appealing sometimes to modern and at other times to traditional features of society. In his comparison between societies in Asia and Africa, he concluded that the political challenge of dealing with cultural pluralism had similarities across the two regions. For example, he was the first to argue that countries such as India and Nigeria can be described not as nation-states but rather as state-nations whose prime task is to manage heterogeneity. Young's work was important in directing other Africanists at the time to focus on threats to state coherence and stability (e.g., Rothchild and Olorunsola 1983).

It is worth noting that when calls were made in the field for "bringing the state back in" (e.g., Evans et al. 1985) they coincided with the slowing down of research on the African state. As suggested earlier, it was especially pronounced in the years following independence when nation-building remained the outstanding challenge. The irony is that although structural functionalism relies on a systems theory to explain politics, the empirical examinations of African politics in the immediate post-independence period chose the role of the state as a more helpful guiding concept. This first attempt to incorporate African politics into a dominant theory, therefore, did not go far. The enthusiasm that the spurt had generated at first faded

quite quickly when tested in the complex and at the time still largely uncharted terrain of African politics.

1.2.2 *Rational Choice Theory*

The second spurt in Comparative Politics was very much the opposite of the first. The ambition of structural functionalists was to include all possibly relevant variables into a single theory that could explain change at a high level of complexity. The nation-state (or state-nation) was the unit of analysis. Interest in human agency was nil. Instead, in functionalist theory, as noted earlier, structures took on the role of self-enforcing entities. The rational choice approach moved in the opposite direction. It eschewed complexity and took pride in offering parsimony, that is, the simplest possible explanation of a given policy puzzle.

Inspiration came from another long intellectual tradition in Western thinking dating back to Adam Smith. In his liberal market theory, individuals are perceived as innately ready to maximize their own utility. This simple formula is the core of the neo-liberal philosophy that emerged in the late 1970s and made its way into political science soon thereafter. Typically referred to as rational choice theory, it takes values out of the analytical equation by treating them as given and applicable to any cultural or national context. The injection of rational choice into the discipline spurred its growth in the direction of game theory and other similar models to analyse politics. It entered the comparative analysis of African politics in more modest ways. The most influential piece to pave the way for rational choice was probably the study by Robert Bates (1981) of markets and states in Africa. His book argues that most post-colonial government leaders in Africa favour urban consumers over rural agricultural producers, thereby limiting the growth potential of their economies. He shows how leaders in Kenya who had indeed accumulated land – and cultivated it – laid a stronger foundation for national development than their counterparts in Tanzania who were prevented by socialist policies from accumulating land and as a result tended to see their

interest lie with urban consumers. It was not difficult to read on and between the lines that the growth of an indigenous middle class (or bourgeoisie) was viewed as a positive scenario.

The relative success of Bates's work and later studies in the same vein, for example, Posner (2005), in influencing the course of Comparative Politics prompted the growth of a broad alternative literature by African and expatriate neo-Marxists, pointing to the damage that these neo-liberal policy reforms were doing to African economies and society. This critical orientation had emerged already in opposition to modernization but gathered momentum among African and Africanist scholars as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund demanded tough economic policy reforms of African governments in the late 1970s (Leys 1975; Amin 1976; Coulson 1982). Because rational choice theory was linked with international policy advice that ignored or downplayed local input, it never gained support in African academic circles. Instead, students in African universities in the 1980s were largely fed its neo-Marxist critique.

The neo-liberal analysis of African development, like that of the neo-Marxist, did not survive long. Both suffered from being out of touch with the socio-economic conditions in Africa. The former overestimated the magic of the market, the latter the transformative potential of a pre-capitalist society (Hyden 1980). Scepticism among political scientists reflected a critique along two lines. The first maintained that rational choice was too general, with parsimony easily becoming an end in and of itself, overlooking how structures and institutions confine agency (e.g., Young 1994; Mkandawire and Olukoshi 1995; Herbst 2000). The second came from pointing to the rich literature on the communal feature of African politics and its implications for human behaviour (e.g., Ekeh 1975; Wai 1987). Thus, the policy prescriptions derived from the use of a rational choice theory made little sense, and by the 1990s both theories had been abandoned or modified to the point where they exercised little influence on political science research in Africa. It was instead the flash of democratization, especially in Eastern Europe and Latin America,

that started to attract comparativists, including those with an interest in Africa.

1.2.3 Democratic Theory

The third spurt using a general theory to explain politics is perhaps the most controversial because it is a tool not only for analysis but also for promoting a specific political agenda. Democratic theory is an outgrowth of Western philosophy and political experience. When it was put to life in comparative political analysis it drew on the writings of one of the most prominent theorists in the discipline, Robert Dahl (1971). What makes this attempt contested is that comparativists have embraced the notion of democracy as "the only game in town". By taking it for granted, comparative analysis has been made a matter of how well countries around the world play the game. This brash acceptance of democracy's normativity is present in measures of how closely countries adhere to a preconceived theoretical model derived from the experience of already mature democracies. The focus has been on the quality of a country's democratic institutions as they relate to holding free and fair elections, practising the rule of law, and respecting human rights. This approach has led to the creation of various governance indices that help analysts to quantitatively differentiate between countries in terms of their degree of democracy. Much of this was driven by the euphoria in the late twentieth century that democracy was seemingly gaining a hold in countries across the world. One of the most prominent scholars in the field of Comparative Politics, Huntington (1991), played an important role in setting the democratic research and policy agenda by labelling the process the "Third Wave of Democratization", which, unlike the two previous democratic waves in the twentieth century, had a global reach.

In an African perspective, much of what has been written by comparativists on democratization misses the point that effects of the Third Wave vary significantly not only between regions of the world but also among individual countries in each region. These differences rely both on the level of commitment to democratic values and on

structural conditions. The prevailing institutional analysis puts too much emphasis on voluntarist human agency, ignoring the fact that choice and behaviour are also rooted in social formations or structures. This shortcoming is evident in the African cases where the democratic wave has not penetrated in the same way as it has done in Latin America and Eastern Europe. A major reason is that African countries lack the dynamic that comes from class-based social cleavages. Social formations in African countries are based not on relations of production but rather on relations of consumption. People are organized into communities that compete for control of how public resources are shared and distributed. As this book will discuss in greater detail, public institutions operate in a manner that is quite different from what democratic theory assumes. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that democratization has proved to be especially abstruse in the African region.

The problem with research driven by democratic theory has been its lack of attention to context. A review of institutional reforms in developing countries that include both politics and public administration concludes that these attempts have been largely unsuccessful because they have failed to alter underlying norms and values. The results of these reform efforts have been confined to redesign "on paper" rather than in practice (Andrews 2013). Another powerful signal of the limits of this research is the focus on "backsliding" (Bermeo 2016; Rakner 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018). While such backsliding may be significant in some regions of the world and noticeable not only in countries such as Turkey and Thailand but also in the United States, it is not a prime issue in Africa because of the limited penetration of democratic values in the first place. The African trajectory is different: the problem is not democracy in retreat but one still in demand. As Bratton and Housseou (2014) have demonstrated, people in Africa are still waiting for more democracy to be realized, a theme that is also at the centre of analysis in an edited overview of democratization in Africa (Lynch and VonDoepp 2020).

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) provide a recent overview of how democracies "die", that is, lose their legitimacy due to the subversion

of existing institutions. This is a major research issue, but it is foremost applicable to already developed democracies, not those that are still democratizing. In the latter, and it is especially true for Africa, the issue is not how democracy dies but why it is not growing. The answer lies in a closer examination of the conditions that favour or hinder the growth of democracy, such as the level of economic development, predominant social cleavages, the presence of an indigenous middle class, or social mobility. These factors differentiate access to power and thus affect how politics is conducted. Africanists and other comparativists have reason to revisit the literature from the mid-twentieth century that argued that democracy does not arise or prevail in just any socioeconomic conditions (Lipset 1959; Moore Jr 1966). Structures do matter!

1.3 STUDYING DEMOCRACY BEYOND WAVES

It is increasingly clear that research on democratization, which has dominated Comparative Politics for some thirty years, faces a new and more challenging reality in the 2020s. Democratic theory no longer offers the reassuring walls for a normal science where solving puzzles within that single framework is the most promising way forward. Anomalies are discovered in all regions of the world. We have reached a point of correction and renewal. This does not necessarily mean abandoning the concept of democracy but entails a fresh assessment of its role in development. Attention needs to be paid to those factors that so far have been largely omitted in the analysis guided by democratic theory. Democracy is a product of social and economic forces, and because societies differ along several dimensions, its preconditions vary. As noted earlier, this is not a new insight, but it needs to be brought back into comparative political analysis even if it is at the cost of cutting short the most recent period of attempted normal science in Comparative Politics.

Political development is a broader concept than democratization, although researchers in recent decades have treated the two as one and the same. The result is that comparative political analysis has been confined to narratives such as "democratic backsliding", "the

rise of hybrid regimes" (Levitsky and Way 2010), and the coming of "a third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019) rather than an impartial and open-ended analysis of which factors determine and shape political development. The fading or reversal of the Third Wave of Democratization ought to serve as enough of a wake-up call. First, backsliding or reversal is a logical consequence built into the wave metaphor. It should be no surprise, therefore, that democracy retreats much like it advances. Second, waves do not surge just anywhere at any time but are caused by natural forces. The same applies to democratization. It needs explanation with reference to factors in the socio-economic and political context. Third, waves do not necessarily hit with the same strength everywhere. Coastlines are not identical. It is important, therefore, to examine how variations in political development can be attributed to differences in the strength with which countries have been affected by the third wave. Fourth, much of democratic backsliding or reversal thinking is a figment of the mind. It results from an overestimation of the effects of the wave's initial democratic reforms. The euphoria that accompanied this turn of events was reflected in both expert evaluations and opinion surveys. It influenced everyone's subjective perceptions. In today's perspective, however, was the wave really such a transformative factor or was it more like a bump in an otherwise unbroken trajectory? Does the ongoing autocratization in some countries around the world merit the label of "wave"? These questions are increasingly relevant as countries across the world are faced with challenges to further democratic development.

The answer for comparativist research seems to lie in looking at democracy from the outside in, that is, studying the factors that determine its position in the broader political context as one regime type in competition with others. Experience in the last three decades has shown that there is nothing inevitable about democracy. It is not a given even in countries that are counted as "mature" democracies. More attention needs to be paid to what gives rise to democracy and what, other than voluntarist choices, keeps it going.

This book throws light on the viability of democracy and how the African conditions pose a challenge to the straightforward application of democratic theory. It begins with a discussion of the classical thesis in historical institutionalism that democracy is explained by socio-economic factors most famously expressed in Barrington Moore Jr's (1966) argument: "no bourgeoisie, no democracy". There is much more to how social formations affect the prospects of democracy, notably at what point in its historical development a specific country finds itself. This is especially relevant in the case of African countries where modernizing society has never advanced as far as in other regions and the conditions, therefore, are quite different. Those countries that have reached a high level of economic and social development have been able to do so by relying on a state capable of shaping society in its own democratic image. It has been critical in not only upholding territorial sovereignty but also integrating communities of people into a single entity, what today is generally referred to as the nation-state.

Many countries, however, have yet to reach the stage where national integration is complete. They are better described as state-nations because the state is still in the process of building or forming the nation. This is an issue in several countries around the world but is especially pertinent in Africa, where state formation was initiated but never completed by the European colonial powers. When African leaders, upon independence, decided that it was too risky to change the already established territorial borders, people were forced to co-exist in one and the same political unit even if they had nothing or little in common. Government leaders in Africa, therefore, continue to be preoccupied with trying to hold the national political community together, with immediate consequences for how democracy fits into their political agenda. The state is far from an independent public institution and rather a place for controlling rents, that is, public resources, that can be used to mitigate or neutralize political opposition, a condition that North et al. (2009) refer to as a "limited access order".

The history of African politics since independence, therefore, has been about the continuous tension between state and regime.

Political leaders have prioritized getting things done, notably pursuing a successful national development but have not been able to escape pressures, from both within and outside the region, to choose strategies based on respect for democracy and human rights. The chapters that follow will discuss how this tension manifests itself in state-nation relations, stabilizing political regimes, sustaining a functionable party system, and creating a viable public sphere – all critical factors in political development.

1.4 CONCLUSIONS

The problem with the three attempts at consolidating political analysis under a single overarching theory that have occurred in Comparative Politics is their teleological bent. They assume or describe trajectories that place Western society not only as the guide but also as the end-station for others. Democratic theory has been used in ways that are not very helpful for our understanding of what it means to democratize. The latter is not just a straightforward forward march to maximizing democratic values within a self-enforcing system. It involves carving out space within already existing systems of governance. Furthermore, its inherent positive normativity notwithstanding, political leaders governing systems in flux are forced to consider multiple and often conflicting values to keep political order and stability. To fathom the factors that determine choice and behaviour, attention must be paid to how macro-structures set the stage for what political actors do. It is necessary to focus the research lens on previously overlooked contextual variables. We are currently reaching a familiar point in Comparative Politics – the end of another brief period of normal science. What happened to structural functionalism and rational choice theory is now on the verge of befalling democratic theory. We are entering a period of evaluation and correction. It means greater uncertainty about what constitutes a dominant theory but also greater scope for bold conceptual redefinition and theoretical development.