Introduction

Paul Williams’s book *War and Conflict in Africa* is by far the most comprehensive and richly nuanced study of war and conflict on the African continent available. It is impressive in its empirical sweep and analytical rigour. Paul Williams ably demonstrates the complex contours of war and conflict. Like all other key empirical puzzles and intractable theoretical questions, the causes and consequences of war and conflict have no easy answers. The tendency to mine findings and deploy stylized models always inevitably yields superficial answers, something that Williams admirably steers clear of. Yet the author’s tendency to see everything in instrumental terms strikes this reviewer as a little over-stated.

No other continent witnessed war and conflict at the turn of the century on the scale and magnitude that Africa did. The intensity of armed conflict spiralled following the end of the Cold War. For example, ‘the average number of armed conflicts in Africa starting each year during the 1990s was twice that of the previous decade’ (p. 5). Therefore, Williams’s book is an important contribution to the scholarly debate on a very critical question and empirical puzzle: why have African states and societies been more prone to war and what underlying factors account for the persistence of armed conflict on the continent?

The strength of this volume lies in its ontological orientation and theoretical thrust. Like other big social questions, the causes and consequences of armed conflict defy the search for findings and the rush for conclusions. Acutely aware of the complexity of conflict, Williams patiently works through the multiplicity of ‘recipes for making wars and the multiple ingredients which go into them (p. 9).’ This is an important departure from the tendency to mine data and deliver an elegant causal argument based on a supposedly singularly decisive variable.

The rest of this essay proceeds in two broad sections. In the next section, I summarise William’s central arguments and the overall structure of the book. The book’s central claim may not surprise a keen student of contemporary African politics, but it is nevertheless compelling in the empirical material it marshals and the theoretical insights it provides. In the second section of this review, I turn to a critical appraisal of the book and some concluding reflections.
In the post-Cold War era, the African continent was seen as a theatre of especially low-intensity, yet decidedly destructive, conflict. The destructive theatre caught the imagination of the Western media, the fascination of mostly Western scholarly work, and the deliberation of largely Western humanitarian operations. Over the last few decades, the business of war and war-related activities in Africa has produced a legion of experts and researchers looking for answers and theoretically driven solutions; from scholars and journalists to workers of aid agencies and international organizations. The political economy of this business of war yielded sobering scholarly analyses; but it also distorted and sensationalised representations for Western audiences that are mobilised into trying to ‘save’ Africa.

Williams’s ontological approach focuses on ‘the actors, institutions and processes through which social change occurs’, and views Africa’s wars as ‘complex social processes which are simultaneously, but to varying degrees, local, national, regional and global’ (p. 43). This raises the legendary ‘level of analysis problem’ (identifying the locations for sources of explanation) in the study of international relations, and by extension the level of explanation problem (assigning explanatory weight to different locations). Williams refers to the problem of dimension and explanation as scapes and these can be seen as local, national, regional and global warscapes. Like all matters of socio-political, Africa’s wars were local. In many of the wars across the breadth of the continent, ‘local agendas and the contours of domestic politics played decisive roles in their onset, their sustenance and, ultimately, their endings.’ Wars were fought over and involved changing configurations of ideologically and religious identity – he underscores the relationships between local actors (pp. 45-6). At the national level, contests over power and the failure of states to effectively broadcast power made possible war outbreaks, escalation and recurrence. Regional security complexes driven by porous borders and cross-border kinship ties and commercial dealings played a contributing role in fuelling Africa’s wars. Finally, at the global level, the flow of resources and ideological narratives and the geo-strategic imperatives especially in the context of the war on terror all coalesced in ways that facilitated war onset and fostered war continuation (pp. 49-50).

Williams’s central argument is that Africa’s wars and conflicts can be located at the interstices of state and society relations. In examining a range of recipes that are the ingredients for war – governance, natural resources, sovereignty, ethnicity and religion – he underscores the regular use of violence to attain state power and economic advancement. The chief source of war and conflict, Williams argues, ‘was the way in which regimes in many of the continent’s weak states prioritised their survival over pursuing genuinely national development and were quite willing to use violence to deal with any serious challenges’ (p. 62). The logic of neopatrimonialism that entailed informal and personal ties of exchanges and reciprocities for political legitimation left most African states weakly institutionalized and vulnerable to breakdown of social order and ultimately war and protracted conflict.

Williams quite impressively resuscitates the explanatory value of the neopatrimonial model which has dominated studies on African politics but has lost its analytical verve and empirical illumination. In a careful and rigorous examination of the different recipes that either foment or foster war, Williams convincingly concludes that ‘understanding why Africa’s wars broke out could do far worse than focus their attention, at least initially, upon the dynamics within the continent’s neopatrimonial regimes, the political struggles related to issues of sovereignty and self-determination, and the interaction of ethnic identities by political elites’ (p. 275). He also concludes that ‘analysts should be more sceptical about viewing so-called natural resources and religion as principal ingredients in the dynamics of Africa’s wars’ (p. 62). Although he fails to eschew an overly instrumentalist thrust, to which I return in the conclusion, Williams provides a more refined and nuanced role of neopatrimonial politics and the instrumental use of disorder than one finds in, for example, the lucid work of Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Dolizo (1999).

The book is divided into three major parts. The first part (chapters one and two) provides a comprehensive quantitative summary of Africa’s post-Cold War wars, the casualty figures for both armed and civilian. In this part of the book, Williams pulls together data from the Political Instability Task Force (PITF) of a group of American scholars, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) and a study for the UK government done by Monty Marshall in 2006. From these different data sets, there is an attempt to count the total number of major armed conflicts, armed conflict related events, battle deaths and war-related deaths. In addition, and most recently, there has been use of geographic information system (GIS) by UCDP and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) program to identify and plot the location of conflict events. The quantitative material underscores the concerted if futile determination of scholars and humanitarian agencies to generate statistical tools for easy use in representing Africa’s wars and conflicts. Williams draws on these different data to ascertain the intensity of and responsibility for conflict, notwithstanding the shortfalls. ‘Since some form of statistics is a necessary point of departure for any analysis,’ Williams writes, ‘their usefulness, the best schematic and addressed explicitly’ (p. 38). Generating quantitative data involves decisions about collection and interpretation which invariably means we get conflicting and often contradictory findings. At any rate, whether measured in terms of number of fatalities and battle deaths or the socio-political terrain and the ontological circuit. This is the analysis that Williams takes up in the second chapter.

In part two, the author shifts to a detailed analysis of the major explanatory nodes that inform understanding of war and conflict. Chapters three through seven address one factor in turn, from the preponderantly deleterious nature of ethnicity (neopatrimonialism (chapter three), the role played by Africa’s natural resources in fueling conflict (four), the flow over the currency of sovereignty in the context of war to situate ethnicity (six), to religion in Africa’s wars (seven). In a sense, this is the heart of the book. Williams spends more time and covers greater ground in the book, meticulously dissecting the explanatory value of each of these five possible explanations for both conflict onset and persistence.

Africa’s neopatrimonial regimes presided over states that were vulnerable to disorder and war in the event of economic and political crises. The logic of neopatrimonial rule entailed pursuing ill-thought economic policies that hurt African economies while delivering short-term political dividends. At the nadir of bad economic management under the economic infighting within the incumbent ethnic group between ethnic extremisms and moderates.’ (p. 147).

With regards to the role of religion, Williams notes that religious beliefs and organisations were both a cause of solidarity, comfort, assistance, on the one hand, and a means of justifying extreme acts of oppression and violence. Overall, Williams concludes, ‘with a few exceptions, religious beliefs and organisations were more influential in shaping the dynamics of combat than in triggering the outbreak of war’ (p. 162).

In the third and final part of the book (chapters eight to eleven), Williams analyses some of the notable responses to war and conflict on the continent. Chapter eight covers continental ‘organisation-building’, initially under the Organisation of African Unity and later the African Union, as well as through myriad Regional Economic Communities (RECs). Chapters nine and ten are on peacekeeping and peace operations, respectively, while the final chapter (eleven) tackles external responses through aid and humanitarian operations. The book ends with a short concluding chapter.
The chapters on the OAU/AU/REC's, peacekeeping and peace-operations are easily the most empirically informative in the book as they cover areas less theorized and less researched in studies of conflict in Africa. With the final end of the vestiges of colonial rule and apartheid in southern Africa, the OAU's relevance waned and the transition to the AU was supposed to breathe new life in a project of continental solutions to Africa's security dilemmas. The AU's flagship programmatic agenda, the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), turned out to be a disappointing undertaking bedevilled by conflicting interests among African states and lack of sufficient funds. There were a great many lofty ideas and grand schemes but little execution of results. From the creation of a continental early warning system to the formation of an African standby force, Williams concludes, the APSA came across as just the latest mechanism to extract assistance from foreigners and help preserve regime security (p. 212). It is the politics of extraversion par excellence, à la Jean-François Bayart (2009). The same problem of limited resources, poor coordination and conflicting actor-interests were coupled with what Alex de Waal (2015) referred to as the business of power in the political market place where political loyalty is traded. These problems were often compounded by the perceived limited strategic value of the continent in the global geopolitical matrix.

By far the biggest response to war and conflict in Africa has been external aid intervention, both humanitarian and development aid. Williams addresses this in the last chapter of part three. Both forms of aid got entangled in the conflict complexes and simultaneously mitigated but also fuelled conflict. While humanitarian aid ameliorated the living conditions of the most vulnerable in conflict zones, it also, at least inadvertently, contributed to resourcing insurgents. The question of moral hazard was stark. Activities of relief workers and aid agencies often became a substitute for political action and contributed to weakening already weak African states. In the end, realizing the goal of 'aiding the poor' fell short. But it did not matter that the agencies couldn't actually save the victims, writes Williams, because 'in the world of humanitarian aid, unlike the corporate world, it was not the satisfaction of the client that determined the financial viability of the humanitarian international; it was the satisfaction of the donors' (pp. 259-60).

On the other hand, while development aid aimed to reduce the conditions that facilitate insurgency such as extreme poverty, it also provided 'a life line for various corrupt patronage systems...' (p. 272). The received wisdom in the international development industry was that poor countries needed a push to overcome poverty and remove conditions that make war possible. Thus, since 2005, development assistance averaged about $50 billion each year, and the predominant thinking was that more aid would yield better results. But critics like the Zambian economist and public intellectual Dambisa Moyo (2009) have compellingly shown that aid and overall development assistance has done more harm than good to African economies. But even if aid and development assistance positively impacted African economies, the Arab Spring uprisings demonstrated that 'economic growth alone is not an antidote to political instability if people’s basic political rights are stifled' (p. 273).

Conclusion: Critical Assessment

Paul Williams' book is easily the most comprehensive and thoroughgoing study of contemporary wars and conflicts on the African continent, their causes, consequences and responses. The author covers im porous empirical ground and provides a wide spectrum of theoretical insights. The synthesis of quantitative data from more than five different data programs gives the book an impressive empirical grounding. A rigorous examination of five different possible explanations yields a more refined focus on what has been the nerve centre for wars and conflicts on the continent. That said, the keen reader will find Williams on several fronts. I will highlight only a few here.

First, the book makes no mention of the typologies of warfare on the continent, something ably undertaken by William Reno (2011). The fact that Africa's wars have been decidedly different at different historical times means their motivations were also different and the causes distinct. This also means that some of the wars analysed by Williams were not just inevitable but in fact necessary. Taking into consideration this important reality has implications for understanding both the intensity and extent of conflict in Africa.

The second problem lies in what is in fact the book's strength: understanding conflict as the function of complexes operating at different ontological levels. For causally oriented scholars, the question that naturally arises is how to carefully fully isolate the causal chains and causal mechanisms at play in understanding conflict as it happens on the different levels of analysis. This is of course key for those who believe that the ultimate value of social research is providing precise causal arguments.

The third issue that one may take with Williams' work is the heavy bias towards instrumental explanations. It appears that everything comes down to the instrumental and manipulative ways of political elites and specialists in violence. This is all fine except that the agency of the subalterns, of the man and woman at the bottom of the puzzle, easily gets set aside rather easily and un-critically. The limits of instrumentalism are something that Williams seems not particularly conscious of, at least in the understanding of this reviewer.

References


