



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

Understanding the Dynamics of Violent Conflict in Contemporary Africa

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War and Conflict in Africa

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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.

The project, argument and structure

The project and the argument

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 scholars and the proliferation 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 technocrats trying to implement 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 different levels of analysis 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 power, authority and identity in 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 outbreak, 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 finances, diffusion of 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 African wars and conflict 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 pur-

suing 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 therefore 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 somewhat 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 'students interested in understanding why Africa's wars break-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 manipulation 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 outbreak of Africa's wars' (ibid). Even though 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 Deloz (1999).

Structure

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 statistics 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

are a necessary point of departure for any analysis,' Williams writes, 'their limitations are best acknowledged 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 its population or the number of states, 'post-Cold War Africa has suffered more than its fair share of organized violence,' making it important to search for explanations (ibid). Conflict has actors and players, rebels and governments. But it also has 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 African wars and conflicts. Chapters three through seven address one factor in turn, from the preponderantly deleterious nature of neopatrimonialism (chapter three), the role played by Africa's natural resources in fuelling conflict (four), the fight over the currency of sovereignty (five) and how 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 this part of 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 what Robert Bates (2008) referred to as 'control regimes,' countries like Congo-Zaire, Congo-Brazzaville, Liberia, Rwanda, among others, were susceptible to war outbreak when economic conditions degenerated and political disagreements occurred. Economic crisis made it difficult for the regime to satisfy societal demands from the spoils system. And as revenues declined due to reduced demand for primary commodities such as coffee and cocoa on the global market, state elites moved from being protectors to predators. The upshot was state failure.

Related to this, long-surviving neopatrimonial regimes easily produced conflict during the 'third wave' of democratization (Huntington 1991). Pressures for democratisation created factional struggles and severe political instability was most likely to happen when a country begins the transition from an autocracy to a partial democracy (p. 81). The survival strategies of the neopatrimonial regimes (ethnic marginalization, weak and fragmented state institutions such as the military) 'often increased the risks of generating economic and political crises and made it harder to deal with insurgencies when they formed' (p. 85).

In assessing the role of natural resources, which has been the subject of a lot of the literature on conflict, the most evocative being the 'greed and grievance' thesis (Collier and Hoeffler 2004), Williams concludes that resources were not central ingredients but were sometimes important in understanding how certain conflicts endured and why they assumed the forms they did. Where resources were highly profitable, as in Congo, they made conflict intractable. A related resource over which African wars were fought was sovereignty – the currency and benefits that accrue from being an independent and internationally recognised nation-state. Having sovereign power comes with a slew of material rewards in the international circuits of trade, commerce and illicit transactions. This utility of sovereignty was underlined by Pierre Englebert (2009). Thus, a great many African wars have centred on the quest for self-determination and struggle to acquire sovereign existence for its utility.

The two final ingredients analysed by Williams can be broadly characterised as sectarian factors: the role of religion and ethnicity. The ethnic factor plays a central but often misconceived role in African politics and particularly in the politics of conflict. Williams argues that the construction of specific ethnic identities to support particular political agendas has frequently been an important ingredient of Africa's wars. But the 'so-called ethnic wars,' Williams contends, 'are usually the result of political power struggles between elites whose actions do not simply reflect static ethnic identities... (p. 141).' The political importance and consequences of ethnicity can be constructed and deployed strategically by actors in order to shape the contours of the political landscape (p. 146). Ethnic dominance fuels inter-ethnic conflict while intra-ethnic conflict occurs when the 'ethnic card' is played 'as a result of political infighting within the incumbent ethnic group between ethnic extremists and moderates' (p. 147).

With regards to the role of religion, Williams notes that religious beliefs and organisations were both a source 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/RECs, 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 problems 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 William's 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 enormous 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 take issue with 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 empirical 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 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 subaltern, of the man and woman at the bottom of the puzzle, easily gets set aside rather easily and uncritically. The limits of instrumentalism are something that Williams seems not particularly conscious of, at least in the understanding of this reviewer.

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