

Ann Swidler, Sociology, University of California, Berkeley Princeton workshop on
“Contemporary State Formation: Micro-Mechanisms and Macro-Processes.”

This memo combines some of what I’m working on with a few things I’ve read that seem worth sharing. My thinking is very much in line with Jim Robinson’s notions about the futility of “politician proofing,” but I try more inductively (and without any equations!), to think about what creates more robust, responsive institutions.

I am interested in how and why culture is implicated in the maintenance, failure, generation, or regeneration of robust, effective institutions. I have been studying variations in national and local responses to the AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa. With AIDS, we come back to Samuel Huntington’s old insight about the barriers to economic development: without political development, most efforts at other sorts of development are likely to fail. The global AIDS enterprise is emblematic of many contemporary problems of governance in the sense that issues of institutional competence and political capacity are raised simultaneously at many different levels, from the ways transnational and international organizations work to the multitude of independent actors like NGOs that fill political and service vacuums, especially where states are weak. Even specifying the best unit of analysis to address when thinking about state formation, governance, or institutional competence in many Third World settings can be difficult.

In my AIDS research, I focus on a number of issues:

1) At the macro level, I take for granted Tilly’s basic argument that historically wars have forced states to expand both governance capacities and political incorporation, forcing states to reach ‘down’ into their own populations to mobilize soldiers, financing, and other resources. But in much of the world today, the incentives for state elites are very different because a) the “sovereignty rule” in the world system means that state leaders don’t really have to conquer and rule the territory they claim in order to reap the benefits of rule (see Jeff Herbst’s work) and b) state elites in “enclave economies” (Leonard and Straus, among others) can raise resources from oil, diamonds, etc. without having to rely on taxes or mobilization of their own people. Donor money may produce the same result by leading state elites to rely on outside sponsors, rather than forcing them to mobilize internal constituencies for support.

2) “Cultural match”: One of the most interesting approaches from my point of view is a paper by Steven Cornell and Joseph Kalt (2000). Cornell and Kalt argue that the large differences in governance among American Indian tribes correspond to how well a tribe’s current institutions “match” or don’t match the institutional patterns recorded at first contact with Europeans. I am interested in how general this finding might be, and if it applies more widely, what the mechanisms might be through which cultural patterns affect institutional functioning.

3) In looking at how AIDS programs function “on the ground,” I have been struck that many AIDS plans, programs and policies (like those for “human rights,” “women’s empowerment,” “democracy,” and “development” more generally) are formulated and implemented with almost no recognition of or interest in how local institutions function and how people on the ground actually get things done when they are moved to do so. I have become fascinated by the “social

imaginary” donors bring to bear in their attempts to intervene in other societies. These often presume a kind of idealized version of institutional models that make sense to donors in their own societies (from rationalized bureaucracies to individual “empowerment”) but make little sense on the ground. I have been looking both at the ways many donor programs get recast by African recipients as part of their own patron-client networks, and at how donor’s social imaginaries (like the emphasis on “sustainability”) interact in perverse ways with local expectations (papers on “Dialectics of Patronage,” “Syncretism and Subversion in AIDS Governance,” and “Ironies of ‘Sustainability’ in AIDS NGOs” available).

I argue (in “Dialectics of Patronage”) that perhaps instead of trying to eliminate pervasive patron-client ties in Africa, we should try to think about it as many Africans do, distinguishing “good patrons” who are loyal to their sponsors, who redistribute to those who in turn support them, and who (as many village chiefs are supposed to do) mobilize and organize the “generalized reciprocities” that are essential to daily life, from bad patrons who selfishly monopolize resources and opportunities. (This is one of the points made in Chabal and Daloz’s classic, *Africa Works*.) Then, along the lines Jim Robinson suggests, donors might create incentives for patrons to redistribute to clients—for example, making having lots of people show up at a rally for a leader the measure of how well the leader has directed the program’s resources. Such solutions might work better than bureaucratic controls, which turn out to mean that the programs have to be run by “internationals,” who are still unable to prevent “leakage.” More important, the programs never get indigenized or domesticated, developing real local constituencies.

4) I also have been influenced by Joel Migdal’s simple point (in *State in Society*, 2001) that “the very purposes for which leaders employ the state—seeking predominance through binding rules—automatically thrust it into conflict with other organizations over who has the right and ability to make those rules.” (p. 65). [This has to do with why it is hard for Americans to understand that Ali al Sistani in Iran, or Islamic militants in Somalia can have large political influence in very unstable societies.] Thus tribes, clans, village elders, etc. compete to be the ones able to provide predictable answers to local people’s desire for secure rules that assure their claims on resources (who enforces that this goat is really yours), people (who enforces that this husband or child is yours; or who can give you a divorce), opportunity (who or what can get you a job, get your child into school), and reliable help. Migdal points out that especially in weak states, different parts of the state are often divided against each other, and they in turn compete with other actors who can mobilize social loyalties and collective action. The question then is whether such “societal” actors become incorporated within a state that develops increasing institutional capacity and institutional autonomy, or whether power and state resources will devolve to local actors. This capacity of local authorities to enforce “binding rules” is, in weak states with unpredictable economic and social conditions, a critical place where culture matters in creating and recreating institutional capacity. This is not because people are “traditional” and have trouble adapting to new ideas, because they are in the grip of superstition, or because they “believe” in the “legitimacy” of traditional actors. In some ways certain leaders embody collective assent, the collective capacity we call the “sacred” (which in Durkheim’s terms, remember, was the power of the collectivity itself). I have been trying to understand the differences Malawians describe between “good” chiefs and “bad” ones (Collier 2004). Chiefs seem to be the repositories of the “generalized reciprocities” that donors so often try to mobilize in the form of volunteers or

“community mobilization.” The status and authority of the chiefs rest on the fact that they are the ones who bring villagers together for meetings or for collective labor (e.g. to build a school), and they are the ones who often enforce more general obligations, like that of relatives to take in orphaned children or that of those with resources to redistribute them. Witchcraft and witchcraft accusations also enforce obligations to redistribute (see Daniel Jordan Smith on corruption in Nigeria).

5) I have become increasingly fascinated with the “culture” that governs the large and small international and transnational institutions that drive so much of policy development in Africa. I have written about the “social imaginary” that leads donors to favor some institutional forms and imageries over others. But now I am also interested in how the international AIDS enterprise decides which interventions “work,” which projects and programs to fund, etc. This has less theoretical relevance for your discussions, though it is very important for looking at what drives particular policy regimes.

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