

South African ‘Imperialism’ in a Region Lacking Regionalism: a critique

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ABSTRACT *The expansion of South African capital throughout southern Africa notwithstanding, the values and type of regionalism that Pretoria (at least rhetorically) wishes to promote in the subcontinent through the Southern African Development Community (SADC) jars considerably with the extant modalities of governance in many of the states in the region. While market-led integration may be moving apace, political commitment to any supranational regional project remains—and is likely to remain—muted and arrested. South Africa’s ability to thus become an alleged political ‘leader’ of southern Africa and/or exercise ‘imperialism’ is less significant than many think or fear. Studies of regionalisation in the region need to be grounded firmly within the realm of political economy.*

An integral process associated with globalisation is the upsurge in regionalist projects around the world, not least in Africa. The revitalisation of the regional project in southern Africa, exemplified by the transformation of the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in 1992, was an integral part of this dynamic as it was played out in Africa. Indeed, the new regionalism that has been observed in the past 20 years or so may be considered a reaction to globalisation in that some state elites are choosing to respond to the threats and opportunities afforded in a post-cold war era through attempts at strategic engagement with regional co-operation.¹ In this context, developing countries now see the need to compete with more nations in the global economic marketplace, with the post-cold war regional projects emerging as a strategic reaction to the globalisation processes.

Although such responses are obviously regionally specific and spring from the local historic, social, political and economic conditions, it is remarkable that the European integration project has been adopted by diverse regional bodies as *the* model to pursue. The European Union has been identified as

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ISSN 0143-6597 print/ISSN 1360-2241 online/11/071233-21

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DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2011.596743

1233

the template through which countries may succeed in meeting the challenge (or at least fears) of economic marginalisation. Even in circumstances where the 'model' cannot be followed in the short term, because of unfavourable circumstances prevailing in the region, the EU remains the model in the long run, as the ultimate goal.²

The EU has not been shy in encouraging this process, with the European Commission (EC) confidently promoting the merits of a particular form of regional integration as a tool for development in the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries with which Brussels has particularly strong ties. From the perspective of the EC, regional integration in the ACP countries, if conducted through 'open regionalism' ie via approved neoliberal policies, will promote such economies' integration into the global economy and, through this, growth and development.³ As Lodewijk Briet, Head of the European Union Delegation to South Africa puts it, 'Motivated by its own experience over the past fifty years, the European Union (EU) has been a long-standing supporter of regional integration throughout the world, including in the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries where there has been a steady expansion, in both depth and breadth, of regional integration initiatives'.⁴ Southern Africa is no exception.

Whose region?

However, within many parts of the developing world, the assumptions that are taken for granted by the EU 'model' are not present and may present formidable challenges to any region-building venture. At its core, this centres around the question of compatible political cultures.⁵ According to Neumann, studies of region building need to be predicated on questions such as 'who draws the line between the inside and the outside' of the region and 'who takes it upon themselves to include and to exclude, with what intentions, and with what consequences?' As there are obviously no 'natural' regions, region building primarily depends on the actors involved and their tangible policy decisions and interests, which in turn are shaped by dominant political cultures, themselves linked to material concerns.⁶ In short, *whose* region are we talking about?

Following Neumann, two sets of assumptions about region building are generally dominant. In the case of this study, both can be usefully deployed. These two assumptions may be dubbed 'inside-out' and 'outside-in' perspectives.⁷ A narrative based on 'inside-out' suppositions looks at the nature of a region's culture and history. Areas characterised by close cultural and economic contacts are more likely to be receptive to any intensification of co-operation than geographic areas that have no such similarities. A shared regional culture then is crucial and Neumann points to the case of Nordic co-operation as being, contrary to the EU, not a consequential process based purely on decisions made by state elites.

'Outside-in' assumptions deem that regional developments may be traced to changes at the international level. Here, regional co-operation may be seen as primarily driven by reactions to external events—SADCC's formation to

balance the regional great power neighbour (South Africa) immediately springs to mind here. The perceived response to democratisation in South Africa, the end of the Cold War and the hegemonic status of neoliberalism in the context of deepening globalisation might then be cast as outside-in explanations for the formation of SADC. Yet these two evaluations and their related narratives are in fact complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Indeed, the two different assumptions may be usefully deployed to illustrate different aspects of diverse regionalising processes. This is the case for explaining South Africa's role in southern Africa and Pretoria's apparent inability to advance a coherent concrete region based on common goals. While SADC most certainly is a response to outside-in developments, the lack of a common political culture—or rather, the diverse political cultures that exist in the region, often opposed to each other—means that inside-out regionalism is unlikely at present. We already see this in security matters.⁸ Whose region then becomes a question that entails competing visions and interests in the southern cone of the African continent.

Driver of change?

Attempts to promote integrative projects have, according to Mattli, been underpinned by two key prerequisites: supply and demand.⁹ That is, successful regionalism is most likely if and when the demand from non-state economic actors seeking the commercial gains that a regional market may offer is matched by the supply of institutional support from political elites who anticipate benefits for themselves and their constituencies from consequent regional co-operation. Mattli's notion of a market-led demand and supply dynamic, albeit based on the European experience, has salience in explaining the problematic nature of regional co-operation in southern Africa via the medium of SADC. In short, while South African non-state economic actors and their elite allies in the state believe that a regional market offers up a wealth of opportunities, political elites outside South Africa are generally less enthused. This in itself springs from the political culture and concomitant economic implications associated with dominant modalities of governance in the region outside of a small core of states centred on Pretoria but arguably incorporating Gaborone (Botswana), Port Louis (Mauritius) and (possibly) Windhoek (Namibia). In other words, a core region built around the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), well established and relatively institutionalised is the sole part of southern Africa where Pretoria's 'vision' is arguably shared.¹⁰

This highly circumscribed region is problematic given that 'globalization... seem[s] to presage a reconfiguration of the South... and to pave the way for a reconstitution of a new international order in which some of the larger, more advanced states, the semi-periphery, those with an already established productive base, play a key role'.¹¹ The implication of this is that it is the dominant state within a particular region in the developing world that tends to drive the regionalist project. This is certainly the case in southern Africa, where South Africa, by far the economically dominant state

in the region, has been the state most active in the promotion of regional integration.¹² Within the literature on South Africa this has usually cast the state as being hegemonic and either a pivotal state,¹³ or a regional power.¹⁴ Habib and Selinyane clarify such notions, commenting that:

Every hegemon is a pivotal state. But it has to be more. Hegemons not only aspire to leadership, and are not only endowed with military, economic, and other resources. They also have—necessarily—a political and socio-economic vision of their transnational environments, and a political willingness to implement such a vision. If that vision is one of security, stability, and development, as is often the case, then the hegemon undertakes to underwrite the implementation of these goals. Again, that does not mean that a hegemon does not have partners in this enterprise. It often does, but it takes responsibility in the last instance to ensure that the features of its vision are operationalized in the region it sees as its sphere of influence.¹⁵

There can be no doubt that, in the post-apartheid era, Pretoria's elites have been particularly occupied with promoting a rejuvenation of the region (institutionalised now as SADC). This supply-side of the equation in region building as theorised by Mattli is met by an alliance between South Africa's business and political elites.

At the same time, one cannot fully comprehend this phenomenon without recognising that the post-apartheid South African government has acceded to the dominant neoliberalist agenda.¹⁶ Policies based on 'maximum engagement' with transnational and domestically based capital as the corporate vehicles to promote growth are pursued as a central plank of South African foreign economic policy. This serves the class interests of a nascent historic bloc in South Africa, largely outwardly oriented and derivative of money capital.¹⁷ This elite's regional vision is to bring into being the environment most advantageous to the unimpeded operation of capitalism within southern Africa. Yet, while Habib and Selinyane are entirely correct in stating that South Africa aspires to regional leadership (although this would be denied by Pretoria) and equally correct in listing the resource attributes that make South Africa a regional power, as well as the crucial political and socioeconomic vision on what the region should look like, I suggest they are wrong in their estimation of Pretoria's ability to implement such a vision. Certainly the idea that South Africa is some sort of 'norm entrepreneur' within the region is fanciful, to say the least.¹⁸

It is absolutely true that South Africa's regional diplomacy at SADC has often spoken of the need for 'good governance' and 'democracy' alongside a discourse associated with 'growth' and (to a lesser extent) development. This has been implicitly and explicitly linked to the need to develop closer regional co-operation and greater integration.¹⁹ Under Thabo Mbeki this was cast as part of the putative 'African Renaissance', which in the form of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) made an explicit connection between governance and growth, all within the context and framework of the world economy.²⁰ Mbeki early on in fact staked his case, arguing on behalf of South Africa's pivotal role in such an endeavour: 'South Africa ha[s] the

potential in terms of its economy, in terms of its politics, and so on, to strike out on this new African path [the Renaissance]—leading by example and exhortation as it were.²¹

However, confusing Pretoria's economic supremacy with political dominion and the ability to project a coherent regional vision means that claims that South Africa is any position to successfully advance a regional agenda are overstated. While Pretoria might at times be justifiably accused of sub-imperialism and arrogance,²² the inside-out realities of southern African political cultures combined with resistance against outside-in pressures (often associated with South African capital) mean that the acceptance of South Africa as a regional leader and thus in a position to implement any political and socioeconomic vision across the region is highly constrained. Indeed, South African diplomacy in the region has in fact been weak and its ability to project power is inhibited.²³ While we may concur that 'political power is nothing but a vehicle for the economic process' and that 'the conditions for the reproduction of capital provide the organic link between these two aspects of the accumulation of capital',²⁴ the incomplete form of capitalism in much of southern Africa (see below) militates against a too easy application of the concept of sub-imperialism within the region. Imperialism is said to 'forcibly...introduce commodity trade in countries where the social structure had been unfavourable to it, and to turn the natives into a proletariat'.²⁵ However, class relations in much of southern Africa derive not from relations of production but from networks of political state-based power. Is it thus possible to accuse Pretoria of true imperialism, which is necessarily an economic *and* political project? Certainly South African capital has expanded dramatically throughout the region in recent years, but South Africa's political influence remains highly constrained.

The realities of southern Africa's political economies means that it is not enough to ask whether South African domination can be overcome through 'cosmopolitan' political arrangements.²⁶ Not only does Vale confuse Pretoria's economic pre-eminence with political dominance in the region, but he also completely neglects the actuality of politics within southern Africa outside of the above-mentioned putative core of like-minded states. Indeed, a casual acquaintance with regional politics as practiced outside South Africa would negate any notion that Pretoria can easily project South African leadership and 'values' throughout southern Africa.²⁷ Those navigating the ship of good governance and liberal capitalism, ie elite South Africa's political and socioeconomic vision, in the waters of southern Africa will find it all but impossible to avoid being shipwrecked upon the rocks of regional modalities of governance. It is this fundamental barrier to Pretoria's projection of itself regionally that this article seeks to examine.

South Africa's role in Southern Africa

Early on in the post-apartheid era concerns were raised about the possibilities of South Africa projecting its political power throughout the southern African region. An implicit part of this regionalist project was seen as an

attempt to bind the region together under South African leadership—with SADC providing ‘organisational cloaking’ for Pretoria’s ambitions.²⁸ It is certainly true that since 1994 Pretoria has placed the southern African region towards the top of its foreign policy agenda.²⁹ Note that the first foreign policy document adopted by the post-1994 government was a *Framework for Co-operation in Southern Africa*, approved in August 1996. The SADC mission statement, ‘to promote sustainable and equitable economic growth and socioeconomic development through efficient production systems, deeper cooperation and... good governance’ as a vehicle to facilitate ‘the region emerg[ing] as a competitive and effective player in international relations and the world economy’ was and has been taken on board by the South African government *vis-à-vis* its foreign policy towards its neighbouring region.³⁰ This regional agenda is supposedly to go hand in hand with the advancement of liberal democracy, good governance and neoliberal economic reforms.

However, much of this is unrealistic as the logic and *modus operandi* of political rule in much of the region, ie neo-patrimonialism means that Pretoria’s strictures on good governance, democracy and liberal economics cannot be implemented without eroding the very nature of the postcolonial southern African state and undermining the positions of incumbent elites—an unlikely possibility. What is argued is that Pretoria’s ambitions—and its critics—fundamentally ignore the reality that power in African politics must be understood as the utilisation of patronage and clientelism, and operates within neo-patrimonial modes of governance—the antithesis of Pretoria’s own stated vision for the region and, for that matter, that of most of the donor community.³¹ This reality, to be explored below, destabilises South Africa’s stated goals aimed at influencing and institutionalising norms and principles for the subcontinent’s renewal.

It is true that economic integration is producing a greater penetration of South African capital throughout the subcontinent. South African capitalist entities have substantial interests in the region and regional integration serves these interests. SADC not only provides an export market for internationally uncompetitive products made in South Africa, but also a huge opportunity for investment by South African-based capital across a whole portfolio of interests, be it mining, transport, energy, or consumer and financial services. A focus on African markets as trade and investment destinations has produced great success for both the public and private sector in South Africa; Pretoria not only enjoys a favourable trade surplus with the region but also accrues huge profits garnered from investments made by South African capital.³² This is done purely for commercial reasons—as Rupert Pardoe, deputy group chief executive of ABSA (the largest consumer bank in South Africa) asserted, ‘we’re not investing in Africa for altruism. We’re investing in Africa to make some money.’³³

This reality has political implications and has often played itself out in policy matters—for instance, the admission of the Democratic Republic of the Congo into SADC has been explained by South African business interests in that country’s mining potential (and to a lesser extent in its hydro-power).³⁴ Clearly, the corporate interests of South Africa trumped concerns

about governance, for Kinshasa was admitted without any serious questioning of its democratic status.³⁵

In the economic realm there has certainly been an activist approach to the promotion of corporate South Africa's penetration of the region, in tandem with international capital. Thabo Mbeki in fact asserted during his presidency the importance of South Africa's 'business sector, which has a critical role in continuing the African Renaissance into the 21st century, capable of both acting on its own and in partnership with international investors'.³⁶ This promotion of capital as an active agent in reconstituting the region reflected the reconfiguration of power between government, business and labour, where 'globalization...appear[ed] to give corporate South Africa added leverage over its rival social partners in the tug-of-war over the terms of the domestic renewal'.³⁷

In pushing its corporate interests, South African capital has, along with the state elites based in Pretoria, been engaged in a veritable regional and continental agenda which has sought to institute economic and political frameworks amenable to accumulation. Economically, neoliberal 'open regionalism' has been the watchword, following in the wake of structural adjustment programmes which sought to achieve 'macroeconomic stabilisation' for the movement of capital and, at the same time, performed an important *political* function by legitimising capital's position within state boundaries.³⁸ Since 'capitalism encompasses the entire globe, its architects require a universal vision, a picture of a globally conceived society, to join classes in different countries...[in order] to institutionalize global capital accumulation by setting general rules of behaviour and disseminating a developmentalist ideology to facilitate the process'.³⁹

Pretoria's regionalist project within SADC has recognised this, with the South African state incorporating into its foreign economic policies a disciplining agenda to bring the region into line with the expected (and accepted) rules of behavior. Crucially, while the original 1992 SADC Treaty (Article 5) committed its members to 'evolve common political values, systems and institutions', the revised treaty of 2001 (Article 5.1) considerably strengthened these goals, committing member states to 'consolidate, defend and maintain democracy, peace, security and stability'. In essence, this has meant that Pretoria has advanced the view that spatial territories within southern Africa must restructure themselves and reinvent themselves as 'competition states' so as to attract capital while competing with rival territories for investment.⁴⁰ Yet, while this reifies economic 'common sense' over the neoliberal project, the political framework through which such goals are to be achieved is entirely different. It is here that I identify the limitations on any coherent ability by Pretoria to promote a political vision within the region, in spite of South Africa's undoubted economic pre-eminence.

The paradox in South Africa's regional agenda

The scenario that Pretoria seeks to promote as part of its foreign policy stimulates deep contradictions. This is because a project based on

liberalisation, privatisation and representing the dislocating effects of globalisation has little chance of becoming hegemonic, given that a hegemonic project in the Gramscian sense needs a ‘politics of support’ as well as a ‘politics of power’, however mighty capital and its state allies may be.⁴¹ Currently, and in spite of the economic crisis caused by neoliberalism, ‘the dominant forces of contemporary globalization are constituted by a neo-liberal historical bloc’, and the normative principles of neoliberalism have achieved hegemonic status as ‘common sense’ prescriptions on how best to configure—indeed restructure—political and economic life.⁴² Currently, ‘most discussions on globalization and “development” take for granted the benefits of export orientation and more trade, wondering only if more or less, and what kind of state activity facilitates a positive insertion in the global political economy’.⁴³ The current official agenda of organisations such as SADC reflects the hegemony within regional bodies as well as virtually all global institutions and donor nations of liberal, specifically neoliberal, values and practices.⁴⁴ The robust role that donors play in formulating policy advice for SADC strongly filters through into SADC positions and ambitions—even if only officially—that emanate from Gaborone. As Lyakurwa and Ajakaiye note:

In Africa, the *agenda setting and solution seeking activities* tend to be highly dominated by the development partners, especially international finance institutions (IFIs). The influence of the IFIs tends to be especially dominant in countries that depend heavily on foreign aid and/or have a high debt burden. Such countries are required to undertake certain reforms prescribed by these institutions before they can be eligible for international financial assistance from the IFIs themselves or before they can receive the support of the IFIs for debt rescheduling... [T]he government typically claims that the policies are ‘home grown’ and participatory while the IFIs claim that the policies enjoy ‘national ownership’. The reality, however, is that the policies are essentially the imperatives of IFI conditionality (emphasis in the original).⁴⁵

While writing on the East African Community (EAC), Bachmann and Sidaway noted that ‘the key reason for the approval of [EAC projects] arose from the prospect of attracting significant donor funding; a thorough review of the details and full implications did not take place on the part of the decision makers. These expectations arose from the early donor engagement in the process.’⁴⁶ Personal interactions and interviews with the SADC Secretariat based in Gaborone suggest that SADC is *very* similar to the EAC in this regard.

Having said that, the type of regional restructuring advocated by the SADC Secretariat, donors and Pretoria cannot simply be defined as a top-down project to reconfigure spatial areas along neoliberal lines. It is certainly true that ‘the interests of capital in the countries of the first world are also the motor force behind the current economic globalization’.⁴⁷ Yet, while southern African elites are ‘both exploitative and dependent’, they cannot be reduced to the status of ‘mere front-men for foreign capitalists’.⁴⁸ Rather, they are ‘intermediaries vis-à-vis the international system’.⁴⁹ The desire

among local elites to be seen as 'responsible' leaders who can thus draw on the moral and material support offered by donors and transnational institutions is of profound significance and can be identified in various southern African countries. The political elites in Tanzania, for instance, often seek to parade their country as a showcase for structural reform and an attractive site for transnational capital.⁵⁰ Likewise, the Namibian Ministry of Trade and Industry boasts that 'international investors can invest in Namibia with the confidence that they are not affected by any exchange control measures. Repatriation of capital and dividends occurs freely.'⁵¹

That existing regional projects within southern Africa reflect the impulses of a neoliberal world order is a consequence of the environment within which regional elites find themselves, but this hegemony at the transnational level is not replicated at the national in Africa (see below). Consequently, a disjuncture between the prescriptions of a regionalism based on liberal economic values and the realities 'on the ground' in southern Africa is of intense interest.⁵² Analyses of regionalisation within Africa must be cognisant of such a milieu. Indeed, the absence of concrete common values *vis-à-vis* political governance (in spite of the rhetorical and official SADC commitment) fatally undermines the cohesiveness of SADC and the ability of Pretoria to project its regionalist vision beyond the 'purely' economic.

While the current agenda of SADC as advanced by aid donors as well as Pretoria is the belief that liberalisation, ie liberal democracy and the free market, will facilitate positive region building, the hegemony surrounding what is needed to foster a coherent and active regionalisation project is deeply problematic in the regional context and cuts the ground from under the feet of those who see a South Africa relentlessly (and successfully) advancing any putative imperialist project.

Phrased differently, the problem in advancing a regionalism based on liberalism in southern Africa, despite the hegemonic support it may enjoy at the global level and from the regional economic giant (South Africa), is the absence of hegemony at the national level across the region, with few exceptions. This reality militates against any triumphant application of a liberal project in the subcontinent and calls into question the very viability of most of SADC's policy prescriptions, expectations and, indeed, basic suppositions. What remains and is current is a 'virtual regionalism', perhaps satisfactory to donors and maybe also to Pretoria's leadership, who seek to pass themselves off as the region's leaders. This virtual regionalism is also doubtless satisfactory to international (and South African) capital, concerned only with investment opportunities and accumulation rather than any historic political project. But, if this is the case, the regional model currently being pursued in southern Africa is neither broadly sustainable nor able to enjoy hegemonic regional support. This problem is what we now turn to.

The state in Africa and the dearth of hegemony

It has long been a truism that 'the inquiring student of African politics may be better advised to read Machiavelli and Hobbes than the "constitutions",

official plans, or party programmes of most African governments if he [sic] wishes to understand their central characteristics and dynamics'.⁵³ Personal rule, presidentialism and patronage politics characterise much of Africa, including large parts of southern Africa. According to Fatton, to understand the state in Africa, we must 'decipher the relations of class power, the processes of class formation, and the hegemonic propensity of the ruling class'.⁵⁴ This being so, one of the fundamental problems in postcolonial Africa is that the ruling classes lack hegemony in the Gramscian sense, i. a hegemonic class is 'a class which has been able to articulate the interests of other social groups to its own'.⁵⁵ Obviously, a 'class can in fact organise itself in a state which only barely goes beyond the bounds of an economic-corporative development, but it is only when this state has developed the area of hegemony that it is an extended or integral state, and only then can it represent a fully developed and maximally extended historical bloc'.⁵⁶ This has not occurred in most of Africa.

Upon independence, the African ruling classes were born and entered a process of 'becoming'.⁵⁷ The early years of nationalism may be seen in this light: an attempt to build a hegemonic project. This, however, quickly collapsed into autocracy and failure. Moral and political modes that transcend confined notions of economic-corporate interests and instead reflect freer 'ethico-political' ones are generally absent. Thus the ethico-political aspect, which in a hegemonic project serves to assist in building economic configurations, but also supplies a justifying and legitimising aspect, is lacking. The postcolonial African state has thus, with a few exceptions, failed to escape from a prolonged period of hegemonic crisis, which manifests itself in perpetual crises and institutional instability.

The undertaking to integrate and balance forces between competing leading groups, both old and new, and their regional and/or ethnic counterparts, within the state model left by colonisation proved impossible without any stable hegemonic project. Consequently, the ruling elites' domination and their modalities of governance became (and remain) expressed through both the threat and actual use of violence *and* the immediate disbursal of material benefits to supporters in neo-patrimonial regimes.⁵⁸ Without these twin strategies—both inimical to long-term development and stability—the African ruling elites cannot exercise control. This devolution of power along patrimonial lines served to fortify the power of state elites—but at a cost, for this non-hegemonic rule inevitably led to despotism and unpredictability, the latter being anathema both to the construction of a stable regional project and to capitalism. Property relations became highly personalised and the progressive dynamics of capitalism was diverted, resulting in 'African capitalism [being] a peripheral and bastardised form of capitalism that has failed to create a "higher" mode of production capable of superseding the pre-colonial and colonial heritage'.⁵⁹ In fact, most southern African states are trapped in a circle of under-development, which stimulates societal conflict. The liberal regional agenda, which necessarily relies on the creation of a hegemonic project at the domestic level thus finds itself confronting massive challenges to its successful realisation.

Within postcolonial Africa the non-hegemonic nature of Africa's ruling classes has forced them to take direct charge of the state itself.⁶⁰ However, African leaders have relied on effected control and patronage rather than through building a hegemonic integral state. They control the state but it is a state which their own practices undermine and subvert. Authority does not originate from societal sources or from a rooted bourgeoisie, but rather from raw power alone—instead of Gramsci's hegemonic apparatus wearing a velvet glove over its iron fist, in many places it is the bare fist of the state that citizens encounter. This is in contrast to the Gramscian concept of hegemonic authority, which is exercised through a combination of coercion *and* persuasion, producing the potentiality of ruling with the consent of the oppressed classes. In such circumstances, the iron fist of the state is kept in reserve and rarely outwardly open. Gramsci himself uses the word *direzione* (leadership) interchangeably with *egemonia* (hegemony) and in contrast to *dominazione* (domination).⁶¹ Maintaining hegemony in the Gramscian sense is thus dependent not only upon exercising power through coercion, but also by attaining consent by acting as the 'moral' leader of society. This is absent in the region, where in fact the state in Africa is a 'state without structural roots in society'; it is 'like a balloon floating in the air'.⁶²

To solve the ongoing organic crisis, the ruling elites, as we have noted, practice patrimonial governance as a device to tackle the hegemonic crisis. Indeed, 'clientelistic strategies... aimed at curbing or preempting the autonomy of fractions of the political class' are pursued.⁶³ While southern African leaders might *rhetorically* promote regionalism in fora such as SADC, any coherent regional project is daily undermined by the practices and modalities which this self-same cadre of elites pursues at the national level to solve the enduring crises caused by a lack of hegemony.

Contra the much-vaunted liberal aspirations of SADC's official regional project, the non-hegemonic nature of Africa's ruling elites means that the relative autonomy of the state, which allows reforms, makes autocracy redundant and creates the soil in which liberal democracy might be nurtured, is not present. Indeed, the modern state that SADC (and South African foreign policy) assumes and/or demands as the motor of any regional project is dependent upon the intrinsically bourgeois liberal distinction between the 'public' and the 'private', which then grants space for 'politics' to take on an identity that is different from 'economics', achieving an institutional expression which may be articulated through a genuine regionalist project. Yet the very kernel of politics in Africa is the absolute conflation of any separation between the public and the private.

State power is used to 'acquire private property and business interests, so that the holders of office are also the owners of property'.⁶⁴ And, indeed, the state is the main battleground through which both political and economic domination can be achieved—a domination that is exercised with no concern over its effect on those upon whom this supremacy is exercised. Central to this milieu is the fact that class power in Africa is fundamentally dependent upon state power, and capturing the state—or at least being linked favourably to those within the state—is an essential precondition for

acquisition and self-enrichment. 'By drying up the principal channels of autonomous accumulation without creating a true market, it suits the hand of the president who finds himself restored to his positions of principal distributor of sinecures'.⁶⁵

It is important to emphasise 'the non-bourgeois or non-productive character of the political aristocracy'.⁶⁶ 'The absence of a hegemonic bourgeoisie, grounded in a solid and independent economic base and successfully engaged in a private accumulation of capital, has transformed politics into material struggle'.⁶⁷ As a result, the bourgeoisie in Africa is generally weak and nascent—deliberately so as an autonomous bourgeoisie and an economic base outside of the control of the ruling class is antithetical to the neo-patrimonial system of governance. Yet this necessity for political control perpetuates the absence of bourgeois hegemony, resulting in autocracy and economic irrationality. 'Political instability is...rooted in the extreme politicization of the state as an organ to be monopolized for absolute power and accelerated economic advancement'.⁶⁸

Instead of a stable hegemonic project that binds different levels of society together, what we have in many parts of southern Africa is an intrinsically *unstable* personalised system of domination. 'Intense processes of class formation based on the struggle to death between contending blocs to capture the state for the establishment of predatory rule, and the utter dependence of African societies on external constellations of financial and military power, have ultimately contributed to the decay of the African state'.⁶⁹ Absolutism reigns and power is maintained through patrimonial power via the illegal commandeering of state resources. Corruption, not hegemonic rule, is the cement that binds the system together and links the patron and his predatory ruling class together.⁷⁰ It is axiomatic that a coherent and sustainable regionalist project cannot be built if and when corruption, not hegemonic rule, is the cement that is being used to connect the region together.

Given this milieu, considerable gaps between stated and actual commitments to reform are readily observable throughout SADC and are certainly witnessed at every SADC summit and in every SADC document. Such behaviour is typical of many African states' foreign policies in general.⁷¹ This is because the sorts of reforms that SADC officially promotes *vis-à-vis* governance have within them measures that would considerably cut the opportunities for informal manipulation over economic resources, rent-seeking and the ability to show favour to clients by state actors. Thus what is left is what Van de Walle describes as the partial reform syndrome, where aid-recipient administrations manipulate the reform process in order to protect their patron-client bases.⁷² Such energies as directed into this are at direct odds with the expressed prescriptions and conditionalities advanced by the donors or by organisations such as the SADC Secretariat. Government reluctance to go along with the commitments they have signed is expressed through selective application, delayed implementation or simply non-compliance. Where the continued existence as a Big Man hinges on satisfying patrons and retaining authority over clients, the bureaucratic cadre will

almost always choose the partial reform measures of token implementation of reforms, delivering just enough in order to give the illusion of compliance. As Gibb notes: 'While the African states might want to convey an outward impression that they "buy into" the Western model of regional integration and seek to emulate it, their approach is actually rather more nuanced and sophisticated, designed principally to support the neo-patrimonial African state system'.⁷³ Certainly, much of the behaviour of SADC's elites is explained, not by a commitment to 'SADC values', but rather by 'the demands of great power patrons, international financial institutions (IFIs), multinational companies (MNCs), and inter-governmental organisations (IGOs) such as the UN' which 'have to be accommodated or carefully manipulated in order to maintain access to resources and to avoid sanctioning behaviour'.⁷⁴ Many of SADC's elites are masters at such strategies and have long ago learnt that donors very rarely if ever walk away from recipient countries, however non-co-operative they may be in applying reform measures.

Liberal regionalism and governance: what fit for SADC?

There is a profound contradiction within the current liberal regionalist project within southern Africa as driven by SADC and with the support of South African foreign policy. This contradiction is namely that, while the liberal agenda advanced by Pretoria and concretised by the SADC Secretariat might reflect the impulses of a transnationalised neoliberal hegemony (an outside-in narrative of what the regional project should be), in southern Africa the very basic foundations of a *domestic* hegemonic project are in the main wholly absent, ie the inside-out is missing. This disjuncture means that there is a general failure to situate regionalism in southern Africa in its proper context, as well as a distinct naiveté in evaluating its potential to bring about change.

This scepticism is based largely on an understanding of how politics in much of southern Africa works and on the subsequent conviction that the type of governance strictures that underpin the official SADC line cannot be hurriedly implemented without undermining the basis upon which most southern African presidents and their followers base their rule. In other words the empirical state in southern Africa does not conform to Western conceptions of the Weberian state, something which is a given within the official regional prospectus. While there may be market-led demands for integration, this is not necessarily complemented by any widespread political demand beyond rhetoric and what particular benefits might be accrued to extant political elites. It is precisely the rational-bureaucratic and hegemonic state that is taken as an assumed given within SADC's discourse, as well as Pretoria's own pronouncements on region-building. This, however, is hugely problematic as many of the accepted features of a liberal state are simply not present in large swathes of the subcontinent. In all seriousness, how can a regional project as envisaged by Pretoria be constructed where:

The actions of elites in response to internal and external demands and opportunities — are conditioned by . . . underlying structural characteristics . . . : institutional weakness, economic scarcity, problems of legitimacy, political instability, lack of national identity, failure to secure the hegemonic idea of the state, and external vulnerability.⁷⁵

Equally problematic, however, is the fact that enforcing or seriously advancing the liberal regionalism inherent in South Africa's foreign policy would mean reviewing and replacing many governments in southern Africa. Given that SADC is 'an enterprise of state elites',⁷⁶ the chances that such elites will commit effective class suicide in the furtherance of something called 'Southern Africa' is viewed with some reservation: 'It is highly unlikely that African ruling classes will choose to adopt the principles of market rationality when they know full well that their power depends on their capacity to use the state as a predatory means to acquire wealth and build political clientele'.⁷⁷ And as Bach points out, this has a knock-on effect on region building:

Trans-state trade is dependent on opportunities created by tariff, fiscal and monetary discrepancies between neighbouring economies . . . Far from being an incentive to the disappearance of existing boundary-lines, trans-state regionalization contributes to their preservation. Trans-state regional lobbies have a strong interest in the preservation of good relations between neighbouring states, but are equally active in preventing the implementation of sub-regional programmes aimed at the liberalization of customs and tariff barriers.⁷⁸

Can the major societal changes demanded by the liberal regionalism promoted by Pretoria be made by extant political elites in southern Africa? This is a central question regarding not only the future of the liberal regionalist project in the subcontinent but also in correctly assessing the strength or otherwise of Pretoria's 'imperialism'. Essentially, are those elites who willy-nilly sign up, with great fanfare, to bold declarations at SADC summits prepared to go through with the profound implications that their own commitments demand? How can this be, given that a good deal of them are seen by many as the 'principal obstacle to qualitative changes in Africa'?⁷⁹ Indeed, it is highly problematic 'to conceive how such a system that presupposes a shrunk political arena lorded over by a presidential monarch whose power is personalized and immune from legal processes, can tolerate for long even a modest renewal of public debate and civil freedoms' which are inherent in SADC's official policy prescriptions.⁸⁰ And the structural features of many states in southern Africa are not transitory or easily changed, even by the most determined agent. Instead, they have very deep historical roots springing from a prolonged period of intense colonial and then settler exploitation.

The key problem facing any discussion of regionalism in southern Africa or Pretoria's own potential to be the leader of the region is the ability or otherwise of governance and development initiatives, bound up with a

region-building agenda, to successfully operate in the context of existing modalities of governance in the region. In practical terms, whatever the stated claims of the SADC project, and regardless of the hegemonic status and support it may enjoy at the multilateral level, a regionalism built on the liberal prescriptions favoured by South Africa and the donors is likely to be hidebound—if not sabotaged—by much of southern Africa's well established polities based on personal rule, clientelism and the unwillingness to engage with non-governmental organisations or expend resources on broad-based development projects. These are not aberrations which technocratic fixes can remedy but are structurally and organically linked to the absence of hegemony at the national level within much of the region:

Corruption, graft, patron–client networks, and patrimonialism in weak-state politics are not simply the result of a breakdown in normal politics, or the rise to power of unusually corrupt leaders. Rather, they can be construed as class action necessitated by the fragility of the material conditions of the ruling elites.⁸¹

The logic of neo-patrimonialism underpins politics in southern Africa and stands in contradiction to the very type of policies that SADC claims to advance. After all, 'If political domination becomes embodied in the recognised juridical universe of the bureaucratic state [as SADC's strictures on good governance demand] political elites would no longer have to justify their prominence through the fulfillment of their patrimonial duties. What this would mean however is that they would have to accept both the supremacy of institutions over individuals and the temporary nature of their political eminence'.⁸² Most previous commentaries on regionalism in southern Africa have ignored this reality and seem to take pronouncements of SADC at face value. Criticisms have been aimed at the assumed imperialist ambitions of South Africa (seen to be somehow successfully reshaping the region along neoliberal lines) and at the neoliberal underpinnings of SADC's current agenda, but there has been no discussion of why these assumptions might not fit with southern Africa's politics or how regional politics as they are actually practised might constrain the projection of South African political power. Until that occurs at the policy level, both liberal regionalism and South African foreign policy are unlikely to enjoy an easy ride if and when they confront the non-hegemonic state and its ruling classes across the subcontinent. After all, 'exclusive politics—the one-party state, for example—is in fact, class action by the elite to establish and retain hegemony' and such elites are not going to give this up easily.⁸³

This contradiction is at the heart of the problem facing Pretoria's ambitions to reconstruct the region. Privileged around 'open markets', 'good governance' and a particular regionalist vision, South Africa's SADC differs somewhat from the actually existing SADC. Consider Thabo Mbeki's vision of the continent (and by implication, the region) as part of his much-vaunted 'African Renaissance':

We must bring to an end the practices as a result of which many throughout the world have the view that as Africans we are incapable of establishing and maintaining systems of good governance... Our history demands that we do everything in our power to... encourage all other countries on our continent to move in the same direction... many on our continent have introduced new economic policies which seek to create conditions that are attractive to both domestic and foreign investors, encourage the growth of the private sector, reduce the participation of the state in the ownership of the economy, and in other ways seek to build modern economies... Regional economic associations have therefore been formed aimed at achieving regional economic integration.⁸⁴

This regionalist project postures southern Africa as on the threshold of economic growth, if only the familiar ingredients of the globalisation discourse were set in place. Yet in fact this liberal regionalist agenda replicates the errors of assumption that the IFIs made (and continue to make) *vis-à-vis* structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) as it is ‘based on a series of deeply flawed assumptions’ which ‘posit that development can be “private-driven,” and that African bourgeoisies can suddenly have a change of heart and become the engine of the take-off, whereas these bourgeoisies have never shown any commitment to sustained productive investment’.⁸⁵

Certainly, the type of development policies articulated by SADC requires major infrastructural programmes such as education, communications, the maintenance of a conducive political and economic environment, a reliable legal framework, the assurance of public order and the sort of milieu that can encourage and guarantee long-term foreign direct investment (FDI). This has to an extent underpinned regional development projects, albeit imperfectly.⁸⁶ But, ‘if these functions cannot be efficiently performed, as is unquestionably the case for a large number of African states, then development policies which depend on them will fail’.⁸⁷ Instead, many regional elites utilise SADC to boost their own positions at the apex of what many outsiders would cast as chronically mismanaged polities. Extant governance patterns ‘often [serve] to unify the dominant classes in a framework of co-operation centered on the state’.⁸⁸ Furthermore, this is then projected regionally:

This process also aids in resource extraction and capital accumulation by the ruling elite, because control of the political apparatus guarantees control over the productive forces of society. It may also enable the ruling elite to develop political bases and control the regional and sectoral allocation of resources.⁸⁹

A coherent regionalist project in southern Africa—with or without Pretoria leading it—has to grapple with these realities.

Here, the distinction between regionalism and regionalisation is apposite. Regionalism represents the body of ideas, shared values, and concrete objectives associated with a specific regional project that an identifiable group of actors wishes to realise. Regionalism in this particular sense is usually associated with a formal programme (and often leads to institutionbuilding) that is clearly limited spatially.⁹⁰ Regionalisation on the other hand is the actual *process* of increasing contacts, exchanges, co-operation and

integration within a given region (sometimes referred to as the outcome). Regionalisation may be caused by regionalism, but it may also emerge regardless of whether there is a regionalist project and regionalism ideology or not. In fact, regionalisation may occur unintentionally, without actors necessarily being conscious of or dedicated to it. Likewise, the rhetoric and ideology of regionalism may not always have much practical significance to the reality of regionalisation—as the southern African case demonstrates. Thus, as Bach notes, 'in sub-Saharan Africa regionalization proceeds mostly from interactions initiated by non-state actors and inter-personal networks, faced with decaying states unable or unwilling to assert their sovereignty'.⁹¹

While regionalisation may be taking place across the subcontinent, regionalism certainly is not. Although co-ordination measures are on the agenda of SADC, such processes are commonly managed at an intergovernmental level, with few if any plans to surrender state authority to the supranational regional body and almost no buy-in to anything that smacks of improved governance if and when that might threaten the patrimonial structures upon which most regional elites base their power. Most SADC member states essentially only co-ordinate with each other when and where immediate benefits for the ruling elites are apparent or anticipated. Any co-ordination along the lines of regionalism (as opposed to regionalisation) can be cast more as instrumental implements to promote short-term advantages than as any notional commitment to a long-term regionalist project.

Regional integration projects such as SADC need to be understood as a state-led spectacle that 'can only be as strong as its constituent parts or, more precisely, as strong as its constituent parts want it to be'.⁹² Beyond policies that facilitate accumulation, the non-hegemonic status of much of the states in southern Africa means that many (perhaps a majority) of the region's ruling political classes do *not* want a strong Southern African Development Community based on the sort of 'vision' that Pretoria ostensibly espouses. Rather than being concerned about alleged South African domination and sub-imperialism, studies should instead be focused on the lack of domestic hegemony across the region and how and in what ways the related modalities of governance obstructs broad-based sustainable development, be it at the national or indeed regional level.

Notes

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