

BOOK REVIEW

Liisa Laakso and Siphamandla Zondi, eds. *Political Science in Africa: Freedom, Relevance, Impact*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing and Nordic Africa Institute, 2024. xiv + 272 pp. Figures. Tables. Bibliography. Index. \$26.95. Paper. ISBN 978-1-3502-9949-8.


Political Science in Africa is a long overdue investigation into the status of a dominant academic discipline on the African continent. Arguably, few disciplines have a comparable influence on how political and journalistic opinion leaders understand the functioning of politics in Africa. This makes it all the more important to finally discuss the Eurocentric character of this grossly universalizing discipline and its effects on knowledge production on the African continent.

The editors bring a strong political science record to the table. Liisa Laakso is a senior researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) in Uppsala, Sweden. Before that she was the rector of the University of Tampere and dean at the University of Helsinki's Faculty of Social Science, Finland, respectively. Her work focuses on politics and democracy in Africa as well as international development cooperation. Siphamandla Zondi is professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Johannesburg, and the director of the Institute for Pan African Thought and Conversation in Johannesburg, South Africa. His publications are on politics and security, mainly with a focus on Southern Africa. He is also the editor of *African Voices: In Search of a Decolonial Turn* (Lynne Rienner, 2021).

The volume *Political Science in Africa* is based on a workshop that was held at the Nordic Africa Institute in the autumn of 2019, jointly organized by NAI, the Association of African Universities (Accra), and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA, Dakar). It is organized in seventeen chapters. In the first chapter, Laakso provides an overview on the development of the discipline in Africa. She highlights the challenges associated with “academic freedom, relevance of scientific research and its impact on political developments” (2) and discusses the implications of the decolonial turn in recent years for political science in Africa. Zondi has two chapters in this volume: a chapter in which he poses the question of what exactly the decolonial turn in political science in Africa actually means, and a concluding chapter on the “politics of political science” in which he explores how political science in Africa (as opposed to African political science) can be re-centered. Other chapters discuss major paradigms and thoughts of political science in Africa as well as teaching political science. In the second section of the volume some interesting comparative empirical examples are presented on curricula development in political science in Africa (among others on informality, ethnicity, gender,

etc.). Noteworthy, the only non-African scholars invited to contribute to this volume are Göran Hydén (University of Florida) and Aili Mari Tripp (University of Wisconsin-Madison).

As a political scientist who was educated in the Global North and regularly teaches “politics in Africa” at the universities of Leipzig, Addis Ababa, and Stellenbosch, I would have liked to have seen a more detailed discussion of the epistemological implications of conceptual Euro-centrism (as, for instance, discussed by the great Egyptian-born scholar Samir Amin in 1988). As important as it is to think about whose knowledge is included in a central academic discipline and whose knowledge is excluded: a detailed discussion of core analytical categories, their historicity and the limits of their transferability to other global contexts remains central. Let us think about “the state,” “the market,” “civil society,” and so on—how well do they travel? A postcolonial reflection on the historicity of these and other categories has direct implications not only for how we teach and write politics in Africa, but also for how societies can understand their challenges and arrive at relevant political solutions. In my view, it is not enough to defame political science as “neo-colonial” or “imperialist.” Intellectually, more effort is needed to reflect on the limits of the transferability and applicability of Western knowledge—in this case—to Africa, and to answer the question of how local knowledge traditions can be meaningfully incorporated into this universalist canon of knowledge. From my own research, the area of social cohesion and its local foundations is a good example in this context. The international debate is dominated by a universalizing discourse, including through the work of the UN Development Program (UNDP)—while at the same time important local elements are ignored in the discussion about how social cohesion can be shaped. The Ubuntu philosophy in Southern Africa is just one example of this.

Ulf Engel 

Leipzig University, Leipzig, Germany

uengel@uni-leipzig.de

[doi:10.1017/asr.2024.109](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2024.109)