

COMPARATIVE POLITICS

Theorizing in Comparative Politics: Democratization in Africa. By Goran Hyden. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 186p. £25.99 paper.

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— Jonathan Fisher , University of Birmingham
j.fisher@bham.ac.uk

Theorizing in Comparative Politics: Democratization in Africa, by Goran Hyden, provides a critical set of challenges to scholars of Comparative Politics. Drawing on decades of research and insight—including as a faculty member at three East African universities—, Hyden revisits and reworks some of his earlier contributions to the field to emphasize the lessons comparativists can draw from a structural analysis of the politics of Africa. He also highlights the limitations of some comparativist work and its sometimes uncritical foregrounding of democratization; “Comparative Politics,” he laments, “has been turned almost exclusively into comparative democratization—at the expense of attention to how and why countries change” (p. 135).

In advancing this critique, the book begins with a thoughtful reexamination of two earlier generations of comparativist theory building and their focus on explaining politics through the lenses of structure and agency, respectively. Underlining how both came to be built around Western philosophical, historical, institutional, and, to some extent, experiential reference points, Hyden links these traditions to what he sees as the third, most recent, and most problematic—or, at least, unhelpful—iteration of comparativism. “Democratic theory,” he argues, has not only placed Western norms and experience at the center of the comparativist field, it has further transformed the discipline into a eurocentric, normative enterprise; “the third spurt [in Comparative Politics],” he suggests, “is a tool not only for analysis but also for promoting a specific political agenda” (p. 18).

Though some scholars may object to this characterization of the field, comparativism’s centering of Western historical experiences (real or, in the case of modernization theory, semi-imagined) and norms is a fair and productive point of departure. In the six chapters that follow, Hyden outlines his case, placing emphasis first on the role and significance of historical and local context (Chapters 2 and 3) and then on the nature of societal and governing institutions, including political parties, in African contexts (Chapters 5–7). Chapter 4, which explores the evolving resonance and reality of statehood and nation-building in postcolonial Africa, is particularly engaging and is perhaps the strongest in advancing another key theme of the book, that is, how the African experience in many ways foreshadows—or has foreshadowed—developments elsewhere

in the world. Specifically, it highlights the accommodation (or otherwise) of multiple nationhoods within the same polity. The study closes with an expansive and thoughtful reflection on pressing themes that Comparative Politics must seek to incorporate, from climate change and pandemics to the reemergence of violent interstate conflict.

Theorizing in Comparative Politics is written with pace, wit, and authority, the author bringing to bear a lifetime of reflection and publishing on the issues under study, including in the well-received and influential *African Politics in Comparative Politics* (2005), now in its second edition (2012). The book contains, however, a number of tensions that remain somewhat unresolved. One of these concerns the “target” of some of the critiques Hyden advances of comparativists and of the comparativist tradition(s). At times, the subfield—and political science more broadly—feels somewhat caricatured or, at least, essentialized. The concluding chapter, for example, begins with the assertion that “political scientists strive to be ‘real’ scientists...to imitate the natural sciences” (p. 134), an assertion which is repeated throughout and one which many who identify as such would likely contest. More generally, some of the major criticisms of Comparative Politics—and insights from Hyden’s approach to studying Africa—would be more than familiar to scholars of comparative African politics, from the need to critically rethink the meaning and substance of democratic norms, governance institutions, and political ideology to taking diverse histories and contexts seriously when accounting for political transformation. A missed opportunity of the book, in this regard, is a discussion of the relationship(s) between Comparative Politics and African Studies (and Area Studies more broadly). The implication, at times, is that the two are markedly separate in posture and epistemology whereas in reality the lines are often blurred. The study would pack an even stronger punch if the contours of contemporary Comparative Politics were delineated more clearly.

Other tensions link to some of the ways in which the book and its arguments are framed. It is not always clear, for example, where Comparative Politics’ focus on democracy sits within the study. At times, the emphasis is on how African politics suggests a need to decenter democracy in the subfield, at other times, the focus is on “how existing structures [in Africa] accommodate the presence of democratic values and norms” (p. 135). Moreover, there is some ambiguity around the question of how eurocentric conceptualizations should be articulated, deployed, or challenged, particularly discussions of ideology. In line with a range of studies, Hyden notes that African political parties depart from “the standard notion of political parties in Comparative Politics” in that ideology has generally not been one of their “significant feature[s]” (pp. 140–141). Aside from this generalization not necessarily being accurate in some of the continent’s more competitive democracies—from Ghana to South Africa—it is also based on a

particular understanding of ideology which itself reflects, arguably, Western experiences and philosophical registers.

Finally, and linked to this last point, Hyden struggles somewhat to convey the rich diversity of African contexts in some of his argumentation, at times falling between his dual mission of recognizing the importance of context and history versus developing wider, more general claims. Chapter 8, which compares and contrasts the different political trajectories seen in the four East African states of

Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Rwanda, nonetheless provides valuable insight into how some of the book's arguments apply in practice. These critiques aside, this remains an ambitious, accessible, and thought-provoking book which will be important reading for students of African politics, and Comparative Politics more generally, and will no doubt be an essential reference point for both graduate and undergraduate course convenors on these topics.