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Who is in Charge?

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Abstract

Recently much has been written about the role of "African agency" in the emergent relationship with China. It has been argued that previous writing on the subject of Sino-African relations presented an unbalanced picture, where an "all powerful" China was presented in opposition to subjugated and weak African states; thereby replicating previous Orientalist tropes about "Africa". More recently work by Corkin, Mohan and others has argued that African political elites have much more power in shaping the nature of relations with China than previously thought. This paper seeks to conceptualise the nature of the power relations between China and African states by interrogating some of the concepts which have been deployed in these debates, such as "agency" and to test them through case studies of Angola and Zambia – two of the states with which China has been most engaged in Africa and two major commodity exporter "monoeconomies" – oil in the case of Angola and copper for Zambia.

1. Is China an Emergent Hegemon in Africa?

In a 2007 paper with Francis Owusu one of the authors argued that China was a potential emerging hegemon in Africa and that it was in competition with the United States to become the most powerful “external” power on the continent (Carmody and Owusu 2007). The competition between China and the United States in Africa has amplified in recent years, as evidenced by the first US-Africa summit held in 2014 in Washington D.C. This summit was modelled on the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) which meets every three years and alternates between China and Africa in terms of its location (cf. Taylor (2011) for an overview of FOCAC). However recently there have also been some dramatic changes in US relations with oil exporters in Africa, the commodity which previously dominated the bulk of US trade and imports from the continent, as the result of the “shale revolution” in the US. When Barack Obama conducted a Presidential visit to Africa in 2013 he said that “"Frankly, we don't need energy from Africa" (quoted in Stoddard (2013)). This comment now seems to be being borne out by the facts of the trade statistics, as the US did not import any oil from Nigeria in July 2014, despite being that country’s fifth largest supplier just a few years earlier (Blas 2014).

Related hereto, one of us has argued elsewhere that the “rise” of China in Africa undermines the very notion of “the West” and that this is one of the reasons that China’s rejuvenated interest in Africa has elicited such hysteria in the Western media (Carmody 2013). Aside from the macroeconomic statistics around rates of economic growth, balance of trade or foreign exchange reserves, in concrete geographic terms China-Africa relations are arguably the “canary in the mine” of Western power. The question then is: will China become a hegemon on the continent or are we seeing a rise in African agency pointing towards multipolar power structures and orientations on the continent? In order to answer this question it is first necessary to engage with and define the concept of hegemony.

1.1 From Hegemony to Hegemony?

There are a variety of definitions of what constitutes hegemony. From a Gramscian perspective hegemony refers to the acquiescence of subordinate classes or countries to the dominance of the ruling class or power. In realist parlance an international hegemon is able to set the rules of the game. The American state is no longer able to do this to the degree that it was, whilst still being the pre-eminent state in the international system (Wade 2011). China is busy concluding deals and establishing new institutions on a bilateral or limited multilateral basis. For example the new BRICS development bank will be headquartered in China and that country has also recently announced the establishment of a joint bank with Malaysia which will circumvent the necessity to conduct trade between the two countries in US dollars. China has also agreed currency swaps with many countries around the world ranging from Switzerland and Russia to Argentina. In Zambia, the Bank of China offers customers a facility to conduct business in the Chinese currency, the yuan (Zambia Watchdog 2011). As the world emerges from the global financial crisis it will perhaps be regarded by future historians and international relations theorists as a time of hegemonic transition from the United States to China in the international system, even as rates of economic growth slow in China. For the first time in over one hundred and forty years, according to the International Monetary Fund, in 2013 the US lost its position as the world's largest economy, in favour our China, when measured at purchasing power parity. Others argue however that we are witnessing the emergence of "interdependent hegemony", rather than the emergence of a new singular dominant power or power bloc in the form of China or the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) grouping (Li 2014).

China is now the continent's leading trading partner and a substantial source of new investment, although it was only in 2008 that it was the biggest single foreign investor on the continent (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2014). However, as has been described elsewhere the way in which China deploys its power in Africa is different from that of previous hegemons – as it is a form of flexipower or flexigemony which works with, rather than against the grain of African state-society formations (cf. Carmody and Taylor (2010). Flexigemony is where Chinese actors tailor their strategies to the histories and geographies of the particular countries they are engaging with in order to ensure resource, market and investment access.

As noted earlier there has recently been an upsurge of interest in the role of African agency in shaping the relationship with China. This body of literature may in part be seen as an implicit reaction to an over-emphasis on the power of China in most of the literature, which was natural given the dramatically increased scale of that country's engagement on the continent. This newer literature instead argues that African elites have used their growing economic and political interests to exert power over international and domestic politics (cf. (Corkin 2013; Mohan and Lampert 2012; Brown and Harman 2013).

Additionally as most African economies have grown rapidly on foot of the global commodity super cycle, African political elites have seen tax revenues rise, aid dependence decrease and a greater range of potential partners emerge from the "Global East" (Kragelund 2012). This conjuncture has given them substantial leverage, as has the increasing dependence of China on African oil and other strategic natural resources to power its economy. This reverse or inverse dependence of China on African oil and other critical mineral suppliers has created conditions of interdependence between Chinese and African political elites which is subject to bargaining. Our working hypothesis is that when commodity prices are high, more power rests with African rentier states[1], and when prices fall more power rests with China and with other international actors. However in order to interrogate this hypothesis it is first necessary to more concretely define what constitutes agency in international relations and affairs. Is it a case that many African states have seen a strengthening of domestic sovereignty – achieving hegemony in the Gramscian sense domestically – and are therefore better able to bargain with external actors and power?

While the recent reorientation in the literature has been salutary and insightful we argue that the recent emphasis on African agency risks unwittingly reinforcing "internalist" explanations of African underdevelopment. By positing African elites as being in the "driving seat", or at least being "co-pilots", in relations with China they may imply that they have the power to fundamentally reshape the nature of their state-societies. What we argue is that, in contrast to some other accounts, is that the "power" of African elites has been confined to bargaining rather than

[1] Rentier states denote states that derive a substantial portion of their revenues from rents; where the lion's share of these rents come from abroad; where the rents accrue to the government directly; and where only few people are involved in the generation of the rent (cf. Beblawi (1990)).

structural change, and is therefore highly circumscribed and limited. In order to see this we have to go beyond the rather static and one-dimensional concept of agency often deployed and instead use assemblage thinking that forces us to emphasise the provisional and spatial nature of social change and acknowledge that power is co-existing, multi-dimensional and in constant transition.

The argument proceeds as follows: Section two interrogates the concept of agency and argues that it has certain limitations if we are to understand societal change in contemporary Africa. Hereafter, section three introduces assemblage theory and proposes that we can use this more open and fluid conceptualisation to enhance our understanding of how Chinese activities affect African power vis-à-vis the 'West' as well as with China. Section four then examines the evidence of power shifts that we have from two critical cases, namely Zambia and Angola, whereupon section five concludes by posing the question: who is in charge?

2. Defining agency

The relative importance of structure and agency have been long theorised and debated in the social sciences. Social constructivism has largely transcended this debate by showing that agents create structures through ideas (Wendt 1999). However this raises the question of what agents have the power to create structures and reform them. If resource dependence is a common structure for much of Africa, do political elites on the continent have the power to change this? (of course whether or not they have incentives to is a different matter).

The evidence to date would seem to suggest that resource dependence is a long-lived structure of African political economy and that it is currently being reinforced through trade and investment relations with China, as most of the continent continues to undergo relative deindustrialization as a result of competitive displacement from cheaper Chinese, and other Asian imports in particular (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2012). The global trade structure of the World Trade Organization circumscribes the ability of developing countries to adopt strategic trade and industrial policies which could help to foster a competitive manufacturing sector which could transcend this (Wade 2003)[2] and most African resource-rich economies rely increasingly on revenues and export earnings from a select number of commodities (Bond 2006).

Despite numerous government initiatives to set in motion to achieve structural transformation the situation remains unchanged in most countries: African resource rich economies export unprocessed commodities instead of processed goods which have high(er) value addition, broader and deeper linkages and more economic spillovers. In a sense then we can see that African political elites have not shown the power to change the structural basis of their economies' incorporation into the global political economy (Taylor 2014).

As intimated previously, others might question what incentive they have to do this given the often substantial material gains which result from high political office on the continent through the current structures (Ventures 2014). However the relative lack of power of developing, and

[2] Although it should be noted that Nigeria has adopted multiple import bans, see A Oyejide (nd).

particularly the least developed countries, is in evidence in the World Trade Organization. While according to an African delegate at the WTO "we have learnt to ask why, we have learnt to ask how, and we have learnt to say 'No'" (quoted in Lee (2013: 39)), developed countries have refused to countenance substantial concessions which might lead to a more equitable world trading system, and low income countries risk being further marginalised by mega-regional trade agreements which largely exclude them (Palit 2015).

In the recent literature on African agency there has been a focus on how elites have been able to extract favourable spot prices for "their" oil in Angola when being sold to China (Corkin 2013); how the Ethiopian government has been able to use China to finance investment in sectors not supported by 'the West' (Feyissa 2012); and how the Rwandan political elite has been able to leverage its 'Western' partners due to the negotiating power it gets from having more partners (Grimm 2013). Thus, in the words of Vickers (2013: 677): '*recent studies provide compelling evidence that Angolan political elites are very much in the driver's seat of negotiating Sino-Angolan relations*'. However how favourable deals are depends on the relative balance of power as expressed, partly, through economic demand and supply conditions and the strategic importance of the commodity in question and whether or not it is substitutable. African political elites have demonstrated that they have not, as of yet, been able to change the terms of the extraverted and commodity oriented trading relationship, either through the multilateral system or through the bilateral deals which have been struck with China; a few Chinese sponsored special economic zones on the continent notwithstanding. In a sense then the "power" or "agency" of African political elites has been confined to incremental bargaining rather than structural change, and is therefore highly circumscribed and limited.

A second objection to over-egging the importance of African agency in relations can also be raised which relates to the nature of agency itself. In psychology some theorists have cast doubt on the "mind"/brain division commonly accepted in international relations theory (Pally 2000). For them the brain is simply another bodily organ which responds to physical and chemical stimuli and has learnt from past experience. Therefore there is no separate "mind", only the brain which will react in certain ways to certain stimuli and learnt behaviours. This is not to dispute that some people have power over others, but rather to question the extent to which free will or voluntarism can be attributed to actions. In this context it then becomes very important to distinguish between agency and power. Whilst some African political elites may have gained power in relation to external actors, relative to historical levels, this should not be confused with agency.

3. The assemblage line of Sino-African relations

An alternative way to conceptualise political-economic changes and intra-elite relations between Africa and China is as assemblages. Assemblage essentially means 'putting together'. It, thus, points to the fact that something is in the process of becoming – rather than already in existence. Assemblages are comprised of both material objects and people or other animals and resemble actor networks (Latour 1987). They suggest emergence rather than resultant formation; give emphasis to the provisional and spatial nature of social change; and point towards heterogeneous actors and objects co-existing in open systems without forming a coherent whole. In this manner assemblages suggest that power is co-existing and in constant transition – locally as well as globally – set in motion by co-functioning actants, acting without intentionality as conventionally understood. Power, thus not only exits in the nation-state, but also in numerous interstate structures as well as in non-state actors and in structures, as well as in actors (Acuto and Curtis 2014; Allen 2011; Anderson and McFarlane 2011; Sassen 2008).

This line of reasoning essentially means that we cannot talk of Sino-African relations in its totality. Instead we have to disaggregate the relationship and analyse its constituent parts in order to understand the underlying processes and mechanisms at play. Moreover these processes and mechanisms do not act autonomously but work in tandem with other processes and affect other structures and relationships. In other words the assemblages of the Sino-African relationship also influence other assemblages and other places at other times. To quote Acuto and Curtis (2014: 18): '*Sequences and temporality become vital: assemblages are born into a pre-existing configuration of other assemblages'*.

Viewed in this frame "African agency" is not in opposition to "Chinese power" as they are inter-constitutive. The power of China in international economics and relations arises, in part from the ability to fuel its economy, partly through African oil imports. Likewise, the recent increase in the power of the African political and economic elite derived from a combination of rising commodity prices sparked to a large extent by Chinese demand (cf. Farooki and Kaplinsky (2012)); reduced debt burdens; improved credit ratings; and a diversification of development partners – mostly related to the rejuvenation of Chinese interest in African economies. The assemblage approach thereby goes beyond traditional agency approaches by probing where agency is to be found, how it is established, and which other actants shape its development.

Some might question the ontological status of assemblages, arguing that under globalisation everything is increasingly interconnected with everything else. For example, Chinese political elites are not just connected to the African counterparts but to those around the world. In a sense then global socio-nature could be considered a meta-assemblage and sub-assemblages are merely heuristic devices to make theoretical analysis easier. Viewed in this frame it is ultimately "nature" which is in charge as an actant, as its laws and rhythms defy human temporality and attempts to alter or limit them (Klein 2014). We, however, see assemblages more as an empirical approach that on the one hand forces us to unpack or critically interrogate accepted realities and on the other hand drives us to scrutinise how "agency" works and how it influences Sino-African relations. Thereby it enables us to further our understanding of evolving forms of power in contemporary international relations.

4. Power shifts in Zambian and Angola

This paper began with a question which sought to locate power in Sino-African relations to see which actors held it and along which dimensions. We have questioned some received wisdoms and the ontological status of concepts such as agency. We now proceed to probe these issues more deeply through an examination of Sino-Zambian and Sino-Angolan relations. These two countries are particularly interesting because they are both major exporters of critical natural resources to China. China is now the world's largest consumer of copper and also of oil. Zambia is currently the largest producer of copper in Africa (although it may be overtaken by the Democratic Republic of Congo) and Angola is the largest exporter of oil on the continent to China, and has recently rivalled Nigeria as the continent's biggest overall oil producer.

Zambia and Angola are thus critical cases for the study of power and African agency. If we don't see structural power changes as a consequence of China's rejuvenated political and economic interest in Africa in these two cases that have long-term close collaborations with China; that are of real importance for China geostrategic visions; and where incumbent governments increasingly have turned towards China to finance their visions of becoming middle income countries, the likelihood that we will see structural power changes in other African countries as a result of the global power shifts are arguably slim (cf. Flyvbjerg (2004) for a discussion of critical cases).

4.1 "China" in Zambia

Much has been written over the last decade on Sino-Zambian relations. Zambia has been a "hotbed" of contention over the role of China on the continent, and witnessed extensive anti-Chinese riots in the capital city Lusaka and in the Copperbelt region of the country in 2006 on foot of an election which the recently deceased President Michael Sata had lost. In that year Sata ran on an explicitly anti-Chinese platform, issuing statements such as "we need investors not infestors". He tapped into discontent about the distribution of natural resource wealth and the highly unfavourable conditions under which Zambia's copper industry had been privatised, to the benefit of foreigners (Fraser and Lungu 2007). In the capital city, Lusaka, there was also substantial resentment against Chinese traders who were often felt to be displacing locals from the market. Sata eventually ascended to the Presidency in 2011, after a campaign which was still critical of the Chinese presence in the country, but was less explicitly racist.

On coming to power, Sata's first diplomatic guest or visitor in State House was the Chinese ambassador. This signalled both the economic importance of the Sino-Zambian relationship and that Sata wished to have a cooperative rather than a conflictive relationship. More importantly, maybe, he sent Zambia's first President, Kenneth Kaunda, to China to thank the government and government entities for the financial support that Zambia had received from China since independence, such as the Tanzania-Zambia (TANZAM railway) constructed in the 1970s. Given the growing dependence of the Zambian economy on China for exports and investment, Sata's positionality shifted immediately on assumption of the Presidency as he was structurally enrolled and inducted in the inter-elite actor network (cf. (Hampwaye and Kragelund 2013)). When the Chinese ambassador was leaving the country after completing his term the Zambian foreign minister said "You became part of us. You blended in so well. It is sad that you are leaving" (Patriotic Front 2013). Nonetheless the copper export- oriented assemblage remained intact.

While Sata did introduce some "populist" policies, such as increasing minimum wages and trying to ensure that all receipts from mining transited through the Zambian banking system to ensure that all appropriate taxes were paid, the confrontational stance which he adopted towards Chinese engagement in Zambia was quickly moderated (Cheeseman, R. Ford, and N. Simutanyi 2014). Indeed according to one report shortly before his death the Chinese government paid for Sata's hospital stay in Israel in 2014 (Zambian Watchdog 2014).

The enrolment or translations of Michael Sata and his Popular Front government into the China-centred copper export assemblage resulted, in part, from the commodity's contradictory or bivalent character as both a “national” resource and international commodity (Fraser and Larmer 2010). The nature of Zambia’s economic relations with China meant there was both a demand for, and supply of, cooperation forthcoming from the previously highly critical President. The structural nature of the dependent relationship which has been forged with China is consequently very much in evidence.

This is not to deny that Michael Sata did not try to exert power both vis-à-vis the West and vis-à-vis China (cf. Kragelund (2014)). The most recent examples include a decision to go against the ‘traditional’ development partners’ long-term agenda of privatisation, first by de-privatising the formerly state-owned telecommunication provider Zamtel. The official reason for this decision was one of economics: A commission formed by Sata himself reached the conclusion that Zamtel had been undervalued and hence, the sale had been illegal. The political undertone cannot be missed. Sata used his muscles to fight the ‘West’ and to pursue a domestic political goal of bringing ownership back into Zambian hands. This material and symbolic confrontation (Cruise O'Brien 2003), represents a reinscription of African nationalism, in some ways similar to that of Robert Mugabe, a close friend of Sata’s. In a similar vein, the Zambian government in 2012 decided to cancel the Zambian Railways privatisation agreement.

Moreover, the Sata-led government chose to flex its muscles vis-à-vis private investors. This was done through a number of laws passed in parliament. The most important ones included a banning of dollar-denominated transactions to minimise large-scale tax avoidance and the passing of the Bank of Zambia (Amendment) Act 2013 that enables the Bank of Zambia to better monitor and regulate foreign exchange flows, imports and exports, international transactions, equity investments and international money transfers in and out of the country.

The Sata-led government also seemed eager to crack down on companies that did not abide by the laws governing the country. In this regard, it did not spare Chinese companies and hence, it took over the Chinese/Australian-owned Collum mine because of '*gross abrogation of mining and environmental laws*', of the failure to pay mineral royalties, and of the shooting of 13 miners (Chawe 2013). The circumstances around the shootings are highly contested however, with Sautman and Yan (2014) arguing that the fractious labour relations at the mine were an outcome of neoliberalism in Zambia, rather than particularly poor working conditions at the "Chinese" mine.

Another tentative sign of increasing Zambian agency vis-à-vis external actors came with the release of the 2015 budget that caused a certain amount of tumult in the mining sector as it announced an overhaul of the mining fiscal regime (Economist Intelligence Unit 2014b). As a result of the changes, which amongst others include an increase of the royalty, i.e. the payment proportional to the purchase price of the ore to the owner of the reserve, from 6% to 8% for underground mines, Canadian-owned Barrick Gold announced that it would close down the big Lumwana mine.

This at first looks like the Zambian state exerting power over or against the corner-stone of the Zambian economy – large-scale foreign mining companies. Especially as the Minister of Finance, Alexander Chikwanda, was quoted as saying that Zambia in fact resisted the 'stampede' by the very mining companies that used the threat of closing down operations to force him to nullify the changes that he proposed to the mining fiscal regime: '*[the mining tax changes] will pass through in its current form...These people don't allow us to think about our own ideas, they just want to think for us...some mining companies want to stampede us to change the tax regime*' (quoted in Zambian Economist (2014)).

On closer inspection, however, the overhaul of the mining fiscal regime is not necessarily a sign of increasing Zambian agency. First and foremost, analysts see this more as sign of weakness than strength on the part of the Zambian state. As the Economist Intelligence Unit (2014a) put it in November 2014: '*The raising of taxes suggests the government has bowed to internal pressure to increase the mining sector's contribution to revenue collection*'. More importantly, the change of the mining fiscal regime was essentially a change of tax levels (royalties and income tax), not an alteration of how taxes are calculated. As Conrad (2014) explains in detail, the Zambian mining fiscal regime is characterized by vagueness, where vagueness benefits the mining companies – not the Zambian state. This is especially apparent with regards to the base for royalty calculations and how to measure quantities of output. As regards the former some mining companies determine the base for royalty calculations on the price that they get paid by buyers overseas, others on concentrate or on the smelter output production. How to measure quantities of output is not clear either: some use production figures, others concentrate figures (either when sold to domestic smelters or when exported), and finally some use the number of copper cathodes (sheets) produced.

The result is that albeit mining companies in Zambia pay a lot more tax now than immediately after the mines were privatized in the late 1990s, '*…the number of mines actually paying tax is known to be relatively few*' (Conrad 2014: 93).

The alteration of the mining fiscal regime therefore does not signal African agency in the way implied by the use of the term in some of the recent literature. Rather, the lack of real changes in the mining fiscal regime which allows for a continuation of lack of clear definitions and rules gives the Zambian political elite power vis-à-vis its electorate, not necessarily Chinese actors, as public information about how much tax is paid by whom and why is at best scarce and often (also) opaque. Instead of agency it therefore points towards numerous power transitions at local, national and global levels neither of which alter the structural underpinnings of Zambia's international relations.

As laid out above assemblages are essentially actor-networks where both human and non-human actants exert power. This allows us to go beyond an analysis of how Zambian state actors seek to exert power to also analyse how the very structures of a resource-rich economy limit their ability to fundamentally change the power structures.

China, or Chinese and also other foreign actors in Zambia derive their power not only from their ability to grant or deny new loans or investments of importance for the Zambian government in its quest for modernisation and economic development. More importantly, China derives its power from the structurally embedded nature of dependence that originates in the sunk investments in copper mines, conveyor belts and other infrastructures, jobs linked to them and dependence on copper for foreign exchange earnings and some taxes. The mining sector is characterised by the extreme capital- and technology-intensiveness, not only of the mines themselves but of many of the activities in the value chain that begins with the exploration phase and continues with mine construction, ores extraction, smelting/leaching, refining, all the way to fabrication of final goods and eventually scraps. Especially the first parts of this chain require heavy engineering skills and substantial capital.

Given this, the costs of exercising extensive "agency" through the partial nationalisation of Chinese or other mines would then have been extensive. Instead what was witnessed was power or "agency at the margins" in terms of the raising of minimum wages and threats to renationalise less capital-intensive firms. Londsdale (2000) refers to this as "agency in tight corners". However the central agency was to reproduce the extant structure of the actor-network, despite the formal right to assert full sovereignty over "national" resources, such as copper.

Even this type of agency is precarious as the windfall taxes imposed on copper miners when prices were high, were quickly reversed when prices fell on foot of the global financial crisis. Likewise, the most recent example of Zambian agency vis-à-vis the mining companies in reality did not change the power structures between the complex transnational mining corporations and the understaffed Zambian tax authorities. In a similar vein, the banning of dollar-denominated transactions has since been revoked due to widespread criticism from foreign investors in Zambia; again signalling a limit to the power of the Zambian political elite (Becker 2014). Thus the agency of the Zambian state in relation to the international market (China being an important part of this) has been very limited in both extent and temporality. It remains to be seen what the complexion of the new regime will be after Michael Sata's death in 2014, but the contours of economic and resource dependence are likely to remain unchanged.

4.2 The Angola Case

President Eduardo Dos Santos has been in power since 1979 and is consequently one of Africa's longest serving leaders. He remained in power during that country's long civil war and for more than a decade since the end of that conflict. Corkin (2013) in her recent book attributes substantial agency to the Angolan government in negotiating the relationship with China. In some recent years Angola has been China's single biggest supplier of oil and this has given the country's government substantial leverage in its negotiations with China. This is undoubtedly true, but as with the Zambian case the overall structure of dependence on resource exports has remained in place. Arguably, rather than structural transformation, the principal focus of the regime has been on its own maintenance, which has been spectacularly achieved, with the ruling party "winning" more than 70% of the votes in the 2012 election. The Angolan state has been able to leverage its external connections, both economic and political, to achieve this goal. Agency then has been deployed to market or structure the country's extraversion portfolio to best effect (Peiffer and Englebert 2012).

According to Power (2012: 998):

> State power in Angola does not reside primarily in the government or in the ruling party the MPLA… per se, but more accurately in a clique of technocrats and advisors centred on

> the President…This group, named the *Futungo* after the Presidential palace, is a nebulous group of unelected officials and businessmen around the President Eduardo dos Santos which became the key structure of power in the 1980s, in tandem with the sidelining of MPLA party organs and formal state structures. Sonangol [the state oil company] essentially exists to harness and further their agenda…and as such it constitutes a structure of power alongside the formal state institutions, a kind of "parallel state"… Thus far the Chinese credit lines have remained firmly in the grips of the *Futungo* and there has been evidence of their misappropriation.

This is in contrast to Corkin (2013: 5) who argues that "Angolan political elites, in a post-civil war environment, are attempting to use Chinese financial assistance as a state building device". The discrepancy between these two perspectives may be explained by differences in the definition of what constitutes a state. Power is referring to what is sometimes called the "shadow state" (Reno 1995), whereas it appears that Corkin conflates this with the formal state.

At the heart of this lies the locus of power. According to Corkin (2013: 25) "in describing state power, Mann (1986:113) distinguishes despotic and infrastructural power, the former referring to 'the range of actions that the elite is empowered to undertake without routine' and the latter the ability to execute them". However this dualist conception of power is at odds with assemblage thinking in which power resides not in actants but in networks: power rests in the ability to execute it, without which it cannot exist. What is the nature of the power of the Angolan state and powerful clique around the president known as the *Futungo*?

According to Marques de Morais (2011) after the end of the civil war in Angola in 2002 "the government took a fateful step, calling on China to fulfil the promise of reconstruction – in the same way it had outsourced its national defense needs to Cuba from 1975 to 1989". By way of example the construction of the Kilamba Kiaxi housing complex in Luanda employed more than ten thousand Chinese workers and security for this multi-billion dollar development was provided by the Presidential Guard.

What this example demonstrates is both the power of the Angolan state (to provide security) and its weakness in terms of the provision of public and social service provision. The development then resulted from the power of the assemblage of Angolan state and Chinese actors to assemble building sites, import materials and labour etc and provide security. However it also encounters resistance. "The large Chinese presence has resulted in growing resentment from Angolans and increasing personal attacks" (Shinn and Eisenman 2012: 342), given the nature of the Angola model where 70% of the contracts for construction and infrastructure from oil backed loans from China have gone to Chinese companies.

Shinn and Eisenman (2012: 343) also detail how the Angolan political elite wish to maintain relations with a variety of external partners to prevent China developing a "monopoly of influence". However when the oil price fell on foot of the global financial crisis President Dos Santos made two trips to Beijing to ensure continued access to Chinese funding. This shows both the constrained temporality and relatedly, spatiality of "Angolan agency" in the bargaining relations with "external" actors, particularly China. As the oil price plummeted below US $45 a barrel in 2015, on foot of the shale oil and gas revolution in the United States and a slowing Chinese economy, the "agency" of the Angolan political actors is likely to be even more constrained. In this sense they are "hemmed in" (Callaghy and Ravenhill 1993) by combined resource and external dependence.

5. Conclusion: Who is in charge?

"African countries ought to be able to adopt a … strategy of integrating trade, financing and development considerations in their approach to the BRICS… [however] Africa does not appear to have established the necessary capacity to negotiate such outcomes" (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa 2013: 32), quoted in Taylor (2014: 160).

While not unpacking this, there are multiple issues of power at play here. The first is the power capability of African elites to negotiate deals with China and the other BRICS countries that would promote industrialisation. The second is the desire of African political elites to do so given the benefits which flow to them from current arrangements. The third is the desire of China and the other BRICS to promote industrialisation in partner/competitor countries and the fourth is the ability to do this given the constraints imposed the World Trade Organization which has severely circumscribed the ability to deploy strategic trade and policy instruments. China largely promotes external neoliberalization (free trade and investment) (Carmody 2014) to ensure its own strategic interests through the "new constitutionalism" of the WTO (Gill 2003). African political elites are often happy to deploy the "strategy of extraversion" (Bayart 2000). This coincidence of interests has resulted in an China-Africa assemblage which is itself embedded in a broader structure of empire (Hardt and Negri 2000). For example in 2005/6 15% of World Bank projects in Africa were undertaken by Chinese firms (Chaponniére 2007).

A focus on "African agency" is in different ways both salutary and obscurantist simultaneously. Writers in this school are correct to argue that African political elites are powerful. However their primary power is in their "vertical" relations with their domestic citizens, and their ability to arbitrage or leverage external relations to achieve this. Depending on demand and price conditions they have also been able to exercise "agency" at the margins in relation to capturing a greater share of national resource rents for themselves or their treasuries. However as of yet they have been unable to fundamentally alter the nature of the dependency which characterises their relations with China and other foreign powers and companies. Specifically in relation to China this is because of the successful internationalisation of the Chinese state.

Gonzalez-Vicente (2011: 403) specifically argues that the internationalisation of the Chinese state is comprised of "(i) the re-territorialization of the state through transnational sovereignty arrangements, or what the state governs; (ii) the negotiation and struggle for spaces of statehood within the increasingly capitalist Chinese state (domestically and abroad), or who governs; (iii) and the transformations of power, culture and governmentality within the internationalized state and the attendant micro-politics of everyday affairs and politics of state transnationality, or how the state governs".

The last decade has been a momentous time in African political economy. Many regimes have been able to leverage the commodity boom into sustaining regime maintenance. Widespread debt relief from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund on the continent has reduced the leverage of Western powers, even as the power of China on the continent has grown, partly because it was "knocking on a wide open door" as structural adjustment programmes had opened African economies, African political elites preferred China's non-conditional foreign policy and Western powers had neglected the continent as it largely fell outside of their geopolitical gaze or code in favour of the dynamic economies of the East (Kragelund 2009). However this has now changed.

While many regimes have been able to leverage external relations to bolster their rule, there has also however been an upsurge in demonstrations and resistance across the continent (Branch 2015). This was most dramatically expressed in the north of the continent through the "Arab Spring", although this has now largely been reversed (Egypt) or descended into something approaching anarchy (Libya). Nonetheless repressive regimes do bring forth resistance and this has been witnessed from Uganda to Sudan.

As to the question of who is in charge, this depends on the issue area under consideration. Many African states have become more effective at projecting power across distance and strengthening domestic sovereignty. They have also been able to exercise positive agency at the margins, through renegotiation of resource contracts on more favourable terms, for example. However the overall contract of extraversion (Carmody 2010) remains firmly in place. This contract takes the form of an actor network which is largely stable in terms of its constitution and configuration, even if the personalities involved change, as in the Zambian for example. This speaks to an older insight from structuration theory, which is that while it is true that agents create structures, they are recursively shaped by structures as well. Thus while structures do not create agents, they shape them and their latitude of action or agency strongly.

A potential flaw in the recent (over)emphasis on African agency is that it might unwittingly reinforce "internalist" explanations of African underdevelopment. By positing African elites as largely being in the "driving seat" in relations with China it implies that they have the power to fundamentally reshape the nature of their state-societies. This is patently untrue. In this paper we have raised reservations about how agency is conceptualised in African studies and cautioned that it needs to be situated in the context of both massive power differentials between states in the international system and the continuing and arguably deepening power of transnational capital. While it is certainly accurate and salutary to highlight the power of African state elites and other actors on the continent, there is a need to temper this through recognition of the ongoing realities and structural conditions highlighted above.

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