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Review of Innovating Development Strategies in Africa, by Landry Signé

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Signé, Landry. 2017. *INNOVATING DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES IN AFRICA*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 256 pp. \$71.23.

In *Innovating Development Strategies in Africa*, Landry Signé examines the processes that have led to the development of institutions and public policy in sub-Saharan Africa in the almost sixty years that have passed since independence. Signé uses nine West African francophone countries to explore the key drivers of Africa's transformation, the differences between countries, and the roles of the international, regional, and national actors involved. He focuses on innovations at the level of processes, explored through the study of four independent variables: ideas, interests, institutions, and time. He uses these variables to structure the four chapters that make up the main body of the book, preceded by two chapters describing the theoretical and methodological context of studying innovation in African economic development strategies. The final chapter summarizes the key conclusions of his research and proposes new approaches to analyzing change in political science.

The concept of innovation that informs this book is broader than the usual definition taken by African and international actors to describe their development strategies. By this term, Signé refers not only to a change in the content of development strategies, but also to “the manner in which these changes in content emerge and are transformed, regardless of whether they are modest or radical” (p. 2). His key interest is in *how* these innovations occur. He supports the hypothesis that, though at a normative level some have observed an apparent continuity of development strategies, important innovations in process require attention.

The book does a remarkable job of highlighting the differences and similarities among the countries studied and putting them into a broader context. These countries tend to be overlooked by anglophone researchers, making their presence here especially important. They can be divided into countries that entered independence with socialist-leaning economies (Benin, Burkina Faso, Congo, Mali), and those that leaned more liberal (Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Niger, Senegal, Togo). By conducting a cross-national comparison that focuses on change, Signé highlights both the diversity of actors involved in creating political and economic policies and the speed at which these developments have occurred. African countries are often portrayed as receiving imposed external development strategies with little choice of how to implement them. Signé highlights the role that national actors have in shaping these strategies—one of the unique features of his analysis.

Signé positions his approach to studying development strategies in Africa beyond what he sees as two dominant analytical visions: a political-technocratic, liberal vision, which

emphasizes good governance and the stages of economic growth, and the activist perspective, inspired by neo-Marxist theories, which critiques imperialism and dependence. He highlights the contribution of these approaches to understanding innovation in terms of content, but he critiques them for their inability to understand innovation as a process. He describes his approach as eclectic, with its use of concepts “often considered mutually exclusive, such as diffusion, learning, path dependence, layering and conversion, for an exhaustive explanation of the processes by which institutions and public policies emerge and develop in Africa” (p. 174).

Though this book was conceived within the field of political science, it makes an important contribution to addressing questions relevant to other disciplines, particularly African studies and political anthropology. In-depth knowledge of the relationships among international, regional, and national actors to one another and as drivers of economic development strategies is important to advancing our theoretical understanding of how change occurs. In addition, the findings shared in this book are especially relevant for those involved in shaping economic policy in sub-Saharan Africa. As countries face pressure from global markets and national actors to develop policies that advance economic priorities, understanding the role of regional networks in these innovations is important. Signé’s position on development in postcolonial Africa as a highly dynamic process makes this book a must-read for academics, politicians, and other development practitioners.

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