

Of Magic, Invisible Hands and ELFs: How Not to Study Ethnicity in Africa

Bruce J. Berman¹

¹Queen's University, Ethnicity and Democratic Governance, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

bermanb@queensu.ca

One of the principal means of isolating Africa intellectually and politically has been to characterize it as inherently different from the rest of the world in the era of globalization; the global 'other' locked in a ghetto of failed states and ethnic hatreds. Research by economists and many political scientists has characterized Africa as the site of ethnic conflict and violence of unique virulence that are a primary explanation for its failures of development. This is based on the usually unspoken assumption of market fundamentalism that the failures of neo-liberal reforms and structural adjustment program to achieve their predicted developmental goals in Africa must come from indigenous characteristics of African societies and cultures, particularly its unique degree of ethno-linguistic fragmentation.

On closer examination such research suffers from extraordinary conceptual and methodological problems that rob it of intellectual credibility: 1) It is based on assumptions of the primordial character of supposedly ancient and unchanging ethnic communities; 2) Ethnic groups are treated as internally homogeneous entities whose relations are largely hostile; 3) The supposed number of ethnic groups in a state is assumed to be the key issue of ethnicity ('fragmentation'), ignoring the fact that there is no universal agreement in most African states on the total number of ethnic groups it contains, a central political issue that is never addressed; 4) the 'data' sources relied upon are highly suspect, if not specious; 5) there is no concept of culture employed or any analysis of the internal social and political characteristics of ethnic communities; 6) there has no understanding of historical or contemporary context, political or economic, and how that has shaped the development of and relations between ethnic communities; and 7) it is largely isolated from the large body of research on ethnicity in Africa in other disciplines, which is often dismissed as 'ideological'.

The underlying intent of this research is to protect the hegemony of neo-liberal paradigms; a quixotic effort in the face of the contemporary global crisis. Instead, research on African ethnicity that is historically, comparatively and empirically grounded shows that it is more a dependent variable shaped by the forces of state and market in the colonial and post-colonial eras, including the dominant neo-liberalism of the past 30 years, with crucial implications for how we understand the impact of globalization on the continent and the relationship between ethnicity in Africa and elsewhere.