

BOOK REVIEW

Antoinette Handley. *Business and Social Crisis in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xii + 219 pp. List of Figures. List of Tables. Acknowledgements. List of Abbreviations. Bibliography. Index. £ 19,99. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-108-44503-0.

Antoinette Handley's *Business and Social Crisis in Africa* is the elegant result of an extensive research project developed over twelve years in four different countries—Botswana, Kenya, South Africa, and Uganda—with the purpose of understanding “what kind of capitalist class responds to social crisis, how do we understand its capacity and willingness to do so, and in what ways does it work in concert with other social forces and especially the state to collectively address the society’s major developmental challenges” (3). In order to achieve this, the author employs, in two nested sets of case studies, a two-level analysis: one that examines the political economy of firm-level factors, and another that is an historical assessment of the broad political conditions. The book considers two selected emblematic instances of post-colonial African social crises: the rise of the HIV/AIDS epidemic across the continent, and the proliferation of scenarios involving severe political violence.

The first chapter, which is instrumental with regard to comprehending this work, functions as an extended introduction to the book where the approach and key options are explained. The concept of social crisis is not formally defined but rather presented as a three-dimensional construct, comprising a “shared perception of looming catastrophe” (17) that threatens society broadly rather than narrowly and is an event for which there is no predetermined or obvious response from a business perspective. One positive aspect of this first chapter is the methodology developed by the author to measure the business response to crises (22–23). This methodology is an improvement over other research approaches previously developed on the subject, as it clearly identifies the business-level indicators of a “constructive response” to social crisis.

Part One explores firm-level responses to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the four countries covered by the book and contrasts the dismissive political reactions encountered in Kenya and Uganda (Chapter Two) with the “healthy responses” of the South African and Botswanan governments (Chapter Three). Not only did HIV/AIDS disrupt the African labor markets

from the cost side and thus disrupt whole economies, but it also exposed the limitations of political intervention on that continent and the difficult relationship between social elites and governments. With regard to the private sector in East Africa, the lack of response is related to the extremely exiguous size of firms, the low level of private sector development, the scarcity of indigenous companies, and perceived reputational damage. At the same time, the enormous size of the mining sector in both Botswana and South Africa, and the fact that a significant portion of the labor force in this sector has been affected by the pandemic, forced the big mining companies to partner with public entities to take action.

Part Two examines the firm-level impacts on broader societal stability, starting with the business reactions to political and electoral violence in South Africa and Kenya (Chapter Four) and concluding with an investigation into the degree of relative business autonomy (“not only from the state in question, but also from other aspects of capital, including the sub-sectors of the economy in which they themselves function” [159]). The historical process in South Africa led to a disconnect between the most significant businesses and the post-apartheid political powers, pushing the former “to publicly perform its solidarity with the lot and struggles of ordinary South Africans” (119), thus provoking an institutionalised and constructive political response.

Given the amount of data accessed, and the depth of the discussion undertaken—where 620 footnotes were necessary to direct the narrative—a chapter of conclusion with a summary of the contributions might have been helpful to the reader. The author does not disappoint those looking for a well-rooted analysis of the historical and political economy of these two fundamental social crises of contemporary Africa, and she has spared no effort to collect both primary and secondary data to support her endeavor.

Nevertheless, with this approach, the book remains in the “conventional terrain for the political scientist” (15), as the author does not take the opportunity to explore new avenues of business response to African structural crises. Such avenues might include those opened by recent firm-level phenomena with the rise of digital entrepreneurship in the over three-hundred sub-Saharan tech hubs, among them being those in Kenya and South Africa which have already become known and aroused curiosity worldwide.

Overall, this book is an invaluable source for those interested in further understanding the role of companies in the contemporary patterns of development in east and southern Africa through the lens of the social sciences.

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