

BOOK REVIEW

Landry Signé. *African Development, African Transformation: How Institutions Shape Development Strategy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xxvii + 190 pp. List of Figures. List of Tables. List of Abbreviations. Index. \$89.99. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1108470575.

What is AUDA? Landry Signé's new book: *African Development, African Transformation: How Institutions Shape Development Strategy* focuses on the African Union Development Agency, an organization that came into being in July of 2018 as the successor organization to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). It is new enough to lack its own Wikipedia entry at the time of writing. Signé's book is an account of how AUDA came into being and also about what AUDA might mean for future political developments in Africa. NEPAD, the predecessor to AUDA, had a somewhat tense relationship with the African Union (AU); it was felt to be too much the initiative of the South African government and too closely aligned with the sorts of neoliberal economic policies promoted by the World Bank and the IMF. AUDA appears to be more firmly placed within the architecture of the AU. In this way it signifies something new. At the same time, Signé's line of argument is sceptical of broader claims for the distinctiveness of AUDA, and he questions the space for innovation "within a highly structured institutional context" (152).

Early parts of the book reference scholarship on African development. This offers a broad framework for understanding AUDA's emergence and for thinking about its possible future. Signé first draws a distinction between "activist" and "analytical" approaches, before then dividing the analytical camp further into the following groups: liberal/neoliberal, neo-Marxist, and historical (Introduction and Chapter One). Later parts of the book look at the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and AUDA's emergence in the 1990s and 2000s (Chapters Two and Three). Signé then asks how much AUDA represents real change (Chapter Four) before outlining the institutional architecture of the agency (Chapter Five). Chapter Six asks who will pay for AUDA. Chapter Seven looks toward the role AUDA might play in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the African Union's Agenda 2063, frameworks that aim to promote prosperity while protecting the planet.

A brief conclusion attempts to summarize the issues raised in the book as well as making the case for “eclectic theorizing” (the middle chapters eschew theory and are largely limited to documents relating to the AU).

Signé moves quickly through scholarship on the state in Africa in the introduction. He offers fairly general statements about the analytical camps identified, sometimes conflating categories with a single author (Chabal as synecdoche for “historical.”) Signé makes the claim that “liberal, neo-Marxist, developmentalist, self-developmental, and historical perspectives” are all in their own way “limited or inadequate,” and argues instead for a “more scientific approach,” one he defines as an “analytic, neo-institutional, inductive approach in order to explain the phenomenon through the lens of the past” (5–8). Chapter One offers a more sustained account of this “neo-institutional, inductive approach.” Signé accepts that his own approach is somewhat eclectic, and it was interesting to see how he builds a conceptual language inductively around the case. I would have welcomed more discussion of how institutions actually think, and scholars such as Timothy Mitchell, Mary Douglas, and Richard Rottenburg would have added something to the mix in theorizing organizational change.

AUDA, it should be acknowledged, is something very new. This means that there is a lack of empirical material telling us how it actually operates. Signé had to work around the slightly unsatisfying sense that the work of AUDA is not something he could easily exemplify, and parts of the text remain at the level of conjecture. The one constant is the African Union, and in reading the text with its subtitle—“how institutions shape development strategy”—I wanted to learn more about what the AU actually looks and feels like. What happens at conferences and behind closed doors? Why do certain ideas travel or achieve normative power while others do not? What emotions and relationships are at play?

Signé writes clearly, and his habit of posing questions and then answering them has logic and clarity. Signé also generates useful information on the history and structure of the AU and NEPAD. It is, perhaps, unavoidable that the acronyms and bureaucratic structures of the AU make it challenging for the non-insider to penetrate or fully understand what is going on. It is also striking that public figures who know the workings of the AU from the inside out, such as the former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo, are the ones offering endorsements on the back and “advance praise” on the inside cover (Obasanjo also writes a foreword). This feels like a book for policymakers that would also be helpful to students and scholars with a working knowledge of the African Union.

Ben Jones 

*University of East Anglia
Norwich, England*

B.W.Jones@uea.ac.uk

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Hyden, Goran. 2016. "Beyond the Liberal Democracy Paradigm: A Fresh Look at Power and Institutions." *African Studies Review* 59 (3): 169–80. doi:[10.1017/asr.2016.121](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2016.121).
- Selassie, Bereket Habte. 2011. "Democracy and Peace in the Age of Globalization: Old Problems, New Challenges for Africa." *African Studies Review* 54 (1):19–31. doi:[10.1353/arw.2011.0019](https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.2011.0019).