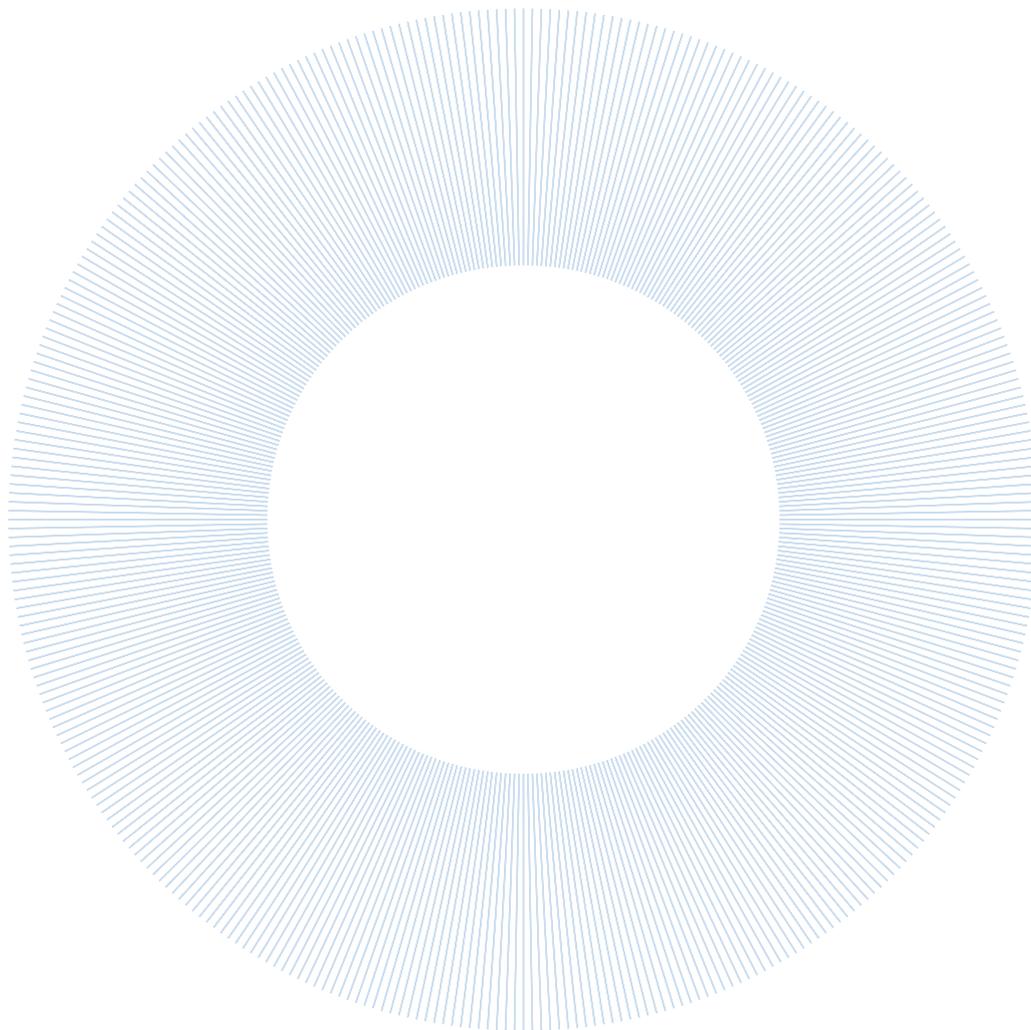


Waiting for Tipping Points



Alice Hills

Volume 8

2015

Number 6

ISSN 1756-2074

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WAITING FOR TIPPING POINTS

Why is it so difficult for donors to change the way that Africa's notoriously predatory police behave? This question takes us to the heart of Western explanations of political change and causality in non-Western societies. Using police reform as its departure point, this paper asks three questions that, taken together, provide insight into the logic of coercive institutions and the nature of political order in fragile societies: Are dramatic political discontinuities inherently transformative? Is the application of notions such as emergence and tipping points anything more than a Western attempt to identify phenomena capable of facilitating democratic development and progress? How is the reproduction of neo-patrimonial forms of coercive order best analysed? Judging from the record of police development over the last 50 years, change is best understood in terms of resilience, accommodation and re-emergence, rather than transformation, innovation or linear timelines. In Africa at least, police development displays a dialectical logic which suggests that Western explanations of causality represent little more than the pursuit of an imagined future.



This paper uses police development in sub-Saharan Africa as a tool for exploring the meaning of change and causality in non-Western environments that are nevertheless subject to the globalised norms of security sector governance circulated by, for example, UN, EU and OECD codes of conduct. It engages with two sub-themes in the IAS's broad theme of emergence (namely 'Emergent systems and relations' and 'Emergency, tipping points and fragility') because (i) notions such as tipping points reflect Western attempts to identify the emergence of coherent and recognisable phenomena capable of facilitating development and progress, and (ii) the resilience of police forces makes tracing causality a problematic art, rather than a science, while also challenging the notion that dramatic discontinuities can be transformative.

Cumulatively, the insights offered here contribute to developing a theory of causality in security governance in sub-Saharan Africa. By theory I mean a general, internally consistent statement that can help to explain police development in a variety of settings, and I follow the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* in defining causality as referring to the relationship between cause and effect. Causation alludes to the relation between events, and I accept Hall's argument that it comes in at least two basic and fundamentally different varieties: dependence and production (Hall, 2004). Dependence refers to a link between distinct events, whereas production is evoked when we say that an event helps to generate, bring about or produce another event. Production is most helpful in this context even though, as Hall notes, the precise relation in any given situation depends on contextually-specified features of how – and by whom – the situation is conceptualised.

The work presented here was prompted by the search by inter-governmental organisations (IGOs), donors and scholars for novel approaches capable of mitigating the behaviour of Africa's notoriously predatory police. The quest is understandable in that the results of most projects are at best localised, superficial and temporary (Hills, 2012a). One reason for this is that donors focus more on the perceived value of what is transmitted than on the way in which it is received,

but a more fundamental explanation that the international community's attempts to link effects to causes is flawed.

In order to investigate these issues, I drew on my previous research on the relationship between police development, structural conditions and triggering events in Nigeria and Somalia. This is supplemented by insights from the broader literature on the occupational commonalities shared by police around the world, which provides a base for assessing the transmission and implementation of the cultural and functional norms, values and procedures associated with policing. Admittedly, this approach raises questions about how qualitative similarity emerges from different cases: Is it coincidence or are common principles at work? What are the recurrent elements? How are potential anomalies (i.e. irregularities) and patterns (real or ghost) best identified? Nevertheless, this approach narrows down otherwise overly broad ideas of change and cultural beliefs and practices; it helps provide a context for what might otherwise be trivial generalisations 'valid only under certain conditions' (Mouzelis, 2008, p. 19); and suggests that similar patterns of manipulation and response are identifiable across Africa.

I explored these issues by means of three questions that, taken together, provide insight into international and local perspectives on the logic of coercive institutions and the nature of political order in fragile societies: (i) Are dramatic political discontinuities inherently transformative? (ii) Is the application of notions such as emergence and tipping points anything more than a Western attempt to identify phenomena capable of facilitating democratic development and progress? (iii) How is the reproduction of neo-patrimonial forms of political order best analysed?

Transformational Potential of Discontinuity

Western explanations of political change and causality in Africa's security arenas are predicated on the possibility and/or desirability of change, which is typically perceived as progress. However, identifying potential tipping points is problematic, not least because there are few – if any – instances of fundamental normative or cultural change.

Disease as well as changes in demography or climate may affect the recruitment, working habits and geographical presence of individual officers, but the record of the last 50 years suggests that dramatic discontinuities or emergencies rarely transform police systems. In theory, dramatic political events such as war, regime change and coups can act as transformative events for officers, the societies they come from and the regimes on whose behalf they act, but in practice police forces are rarely transformed. Officers may be targeted during conflict (for example, in January 1999, several hundred were killed by Sierra Leonean rebels in Freetown), and may return to their home towns or integrate into rebel forces once insecurity reaches a certain level, but most re-emerge once political settlements are reached and locally acceptable levels of safety and security develop. These trends are as observable in Iraq and Libya as in Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Somalia.

Comparable considerations apply to regime change and that most dramatic of political events, the coup. Thus the end of apartheid in 1994 saw South Africa's police subject to radical change, but police leaders have since reverted to authoritarian managerial approaches (Marks and Sklansky, 2012) while the ANC displays personalised power (Lodge, 2014). Likewise, coups have yet to transform a police force. This is primarily because police are adjuncts to groups that control resources more directly; they rarely build power bases comparable to those of the military, and mostly appear unable or unwilling to operate independently (Hills, 2009). This suggests that

police accommodate or manipulate change; i.e. they undermine the transformational potential of dramatic change, regardless of whether it is driven by local militaries or international powers.

The reasons for this are probably to be found in the reactive role and political utility of police, and in the multiple representational and regulatory roles they fulfil. For most officers, policing is a routine job in a specific locality, rather than a vocation or a mission on behalf of the state or a specific group (though ethnic or clan alliances determine recruitment patterns, as in, e.g. Mogadishu's Somali Police Force, which is dominated by Haber Gedir). Even so, most tend to be supportive of the status quo because regimes impose heavier burdens for regime maintenance on them. Police enforce decisions taken by the political elites to whom they are accountable and, as an institution, are 'consistently involved in the output side of the political process' by virtue of their functions: the maintenance of order, paramilitary operations, regulatory activities and regime representation (Potholm, 1969). Arguably, the key variable affecting policing is a president's political calculations, supplemented and/or reinforced by local political realities and the bureaucratic dynamics of the police institution.

This is not to say that police cannot influence politics or politicians: they clearly can and do. Senior officers are well placed to influence political developments such as elections, for they represent a primary location of power and knowledge (i.e. political intelligence) within an established and – this is key – resilient coercive system. Rather it is to suggest that officers 'perpetuate what they have learned in their daily life until there is a need to change [...] well-established routines' (Förster, 2012, p. 5). In other words, the police response to political change is, in Africa as elsewhere, one of reaction and accommodation, rather than discontinuity or transformation, while unwanted change tends to be subverted. Public statements about the desirability of change on the part of politicians and senior officers are arguably better understood as indicating tactical adjustment to unavoidable political pressures, than as genuine political commitment to fundamental changes that would diminish their power and resources.

Perspectives on Change as Progress

Given that dramatic political events rarely transform police or policing, the question arises as to whether notions such as tipping points are useful analytical tools for exploring either political change or order, and whether the assumptions embedded in their use are valid. Assumptions typically reflect Hall's productive mode of causation, so we need to ask whether the application of notions such as emergence and tipping points is more than a Western attempt to identify phenomena capable of facilitating democratic development and progress.

In practice, international police reform projects seek to identify phenomena capable of facilitating progress; i.e. phenomena that can be considered tipping points. They are imbued with a sense of development that reflects Western experience and analysis, and focuses on assessing the extent to which Africa conforms to Western models. Such beliefs are rooted in the twin pillars of the contemporary world system: development and globalisation, which condition our ideas about political change.

The point of departure for most analyses of police development is that democratic-style reform is not only desirable in and of itself, but also that it follows a clear causal (effectively linear) progression, which, depending on context, can be one of either dependence or production (DFID, 2005; OECD, 2007). For example, projects advocating police service commissions, workshops on human rights training and community-police partnerships are thought to be prerequisites for accountable and 'professional' policing. Yet this assertion is rarely subject to

critical examination; to paraphrase Carothers (2006, p. 27), reform programmes operate from a worryingly thin base of knowledge. In practice, donors acknowledge the complexity of change and the productive nature of the causation at work even as they assume that critical transitional moments (e.g. the appointment of a new inspector general, or elections) are identifiable and that a scientific approach to their mapping and assessment is possible. However, while demographic change, fishing or mineral extraction may be open to analysis by such methods, this is rarely the case with shifts in politically sensitive and conservative security organisations. Not only are such organisations secretive but it is impossible to keep variables constant or to identify regular or replicable variables that might explain the sequencing of change (Chabal and Daloz, 2009).

The conceptual tools needed to analyse change in political order in Africa are debatable. Notions of emergence and tipping points are fashionable in a number of fields (though they are more common in science, philosophy and geography than area studies), and it is sometimes possible to identify a single critical event (e.g. the end of the Cold War) or to observe resilience in social and political processes (Somalia's social fabric did not collapse in the aftermath of the war in 1991). However, understanding the relationship between a specific event and/or a series of discontinuities (e.g. physical emergencies, social change and the re-emergence of police forces in the aftermath of conflict in the Horn of Africa) is more problematic.

International advisers claim that their goal is to influence local actors and practices, rather than identify tipping points, but the knowledge required for both is missing. Not only are Africa's societies neo-patrimonial and clientelistic but also its police forces are subject to opaque decision-making, ethnic recruitment, clan-based partiality and corruption (Hills, 2014). Further, Western advisers and attaches are in post for short periods and their job requires them to focus on specific functional concerns, rather than deep or hidden change. Moreover, only a small number of ethnographic studies of police culture and practice have been carried out in South or West Africa (e.g. Marks, 2005; Owen, 2015).

There are deeper reasons, too. The first is that Western understanding and projects are predicated on the belief that culturally-based values and practices can – and should – be transmitted between societies. Although the ways in which Africa's police respond to theories and practices imported from Western societies have yet to be assessed critically, Western projects are predicated on the ability of outsiders to nudge a system from one pathway to another.

The second reason concerns the Western pursuit of progress and development. This is underpinned by a tendency to universalism which in this case is best understood in terms of, first, the search for modernity and progress (as in democratisation and the imaginary future associated with the Millennium Development Goals) and, second, Bourdieu's work on socially constructed modes of comprehension (Bourdieu, 2008, p. 51). In particular, Bourdieu's distinction between knowledge as theory (the Western approach) and knowledge as utility (Africa's) provides an analytical tool for understanding why Western actors attempt to identify phenomena capable of facilitating democratic development despite the hybrid nature of African knowledge, practice and causality as it relates to change in the police or the political arena.

The arguments adopted by donors such as the Department for International Development (DFID) are all too often based on knowledge as theory; they promote a globalising culture on the premise that it expresses a normative truth. In essence, donors see knowledge (e.g. of 'good' policing) as a form of truth, whereas anecdotal evidence suggests that African officers understand knowledge as a means to achieve a specific result. In other words, the knowledge that police and their political masters value is utilitarian in nature; it accommodates international imperatives, ethnic and religious divisions, and policing realities as they are today, rather than

as they might be, and it is concerned with facts, techniques and experiences that can be used to achieve specific functional ends. This helps to explain the police response to imported paradigms and practices such as community policing in Nigeria, Kenya and Somalia, suggesting that even when the process of reform is accepted, quality fades as processes are manipulated by officers so as to protect their interests and achieve predetermined political or personal gains that are at odds with normative reform and Western-style efficiency.

As Olivier de Sardan notes (2005, p. 69), misunderstandings occur either because people do not behave as expected, or the expectations regarding their behaviour are misguided, or because they have good reasons for not doing what is expected (p. 69), and this applies to the identification of tipping points, too. In practice, recipients appear to accommodate rather than reject international demands for change because reform projects provide opportunities for patronage and assets such as buildings, vehicles and uniforms. Hence, Somali police and politicians mimic the United Nations Development Programme's policing model, prompting UN officials and advisers to respond in ways that are beneficial to them – that is, to the mimic (Hills, 2014; Höhne, 2009, p. 253).

However, although local contextual realities include the instrumentalisation of violence and disorder (Chabal and Daloz, 1999), and the war on terror is frequently invoked, there is little evidence to suggest that police employ the language of emergence or tipping points to further their agenda. This suggests that the search for emergence and tipping points is a Western preoccupation not picked up in mimicking responses.

Whatever the explanation, any discussion of change must accommodate that police have knowledge of the world in which they operate, and are aware of how their world is constructed and what gives it meaning. The task is to identify and/or reconstruct that knowledge theoretically.

Analysing the Reproduction of Order

Given the tensions that exist between the West's pursuit of liberal ideals of progress and the reactive nature of Africa's police, how should police forces and the political order they reproduce be analysed? What concepts capture the logic and dynamics of police development? When can actors be transformative and when are they trapped into replication? How is the motivation to seek change articulated? Are Western explanations of change and causality meaningful when applied to fragmented countries such as Somalia? How can outsiders begin to understand decision making in patriarchal, clan-based and chronically insecure societies? Is there something distinctive about African modes of causality?

Despite the established literature on the agency of actors in Africa and the neo-patrimonial nature of its societies (e.g. van de Walle, 2001; Förster and Koehlin, 2011), there is little research assessing the response to imported ideas by police officers and securocrats, or the ways in which ideas are transformed once filtered through local interests and dispositions. One challenge in addressing issues concerning agency, change, emergence and tipping points from an African perspective arises from the paucity of theory originating in Africa, and the propensity of commentators (African as well as international) to rely on literature rooted in or based on Western experience and research. With this caveat in mind, several general observations deserve note.

Africans straddle multiple social worlds, which are experienced as one reality (Smith, 2007, p. 13). They evaluate and manage the environment they confront 'through the interplay of habit,

imagination, and judgement', structuring their world 'in interactive responses to the problems posed by the circumstances they confront' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, quoted in Förster and Koechlin, 2011, p. 7), and the concept of causality is central in this because 'African metaphysical life is permeated by the understanding that nothing happens without a cause' (Mawere, 2011, p. 46. Compare Coetzee and Roux, 2003, p. 197). Further, the visible and invisible worlds are integrated.

The variables influencing everyday life include sorcery, religion and witchcraft, which are a means for managing reality across several worlds (Ellis and Ter Haare, 2007). Thus 'belief in sorcery is not only a causative principle, but it also interlocks with the moral code and the social structure' (Clyde Mitchell, 1952, p. 58), while religion is a 'belief in the existence of an invisible world, distinct but not separate from the visible one, which is home to spiritual beings that are deemed to have effective power over the material world' (Ter Haare and Ellis, 2006, p. 354).

We know that imported ideas are transformed once filtered through local interests and dispositions. We also know that many senior officers in, for example, Nigeria are born-again Christians or devout Muslims, while there are news reports of low-ranking officers acquiescing in the killing of witches (e.g. South Africa) or the murder of albinos for body parts (Tanzania). But we do not know if – or how – religion or sorcery affects police or policing, let alone the reproduction of order. If successful technical transfers require the development of a hybrid form of understanding whereby recipients construct, exercise and validate an adaptive form of knowledge, then the same could be true of the invisible world (though whether knowledge shapes action, or vice versa, remains unclear). This takes us beyond the orthodox understanding of occupational cultures based on shared values or experience, just as it takes us beyond discussions of indigenous knowledge (Yarrow, 2008a).

The broader question of how change may be analysed can, however, be addressed and it needs to be interpreted dynamically. One approach is what Olivier de Sardan describes as 'the entangled social logic' approach (2005, p. 12). In this, interactions are a pathway into social reality and can be used as a means of deciphering social and political situations, both in terms of actors' strategies and contextual constraints, and as means of identifying conjunctural and structural phenomena.

The value of this approach is that it emphasises that change is a process, which can also be understood as going through phases that are similar to a classic dialectical series of movements – only then can the resilience and adaption evident in police development be acknowledged. Hegel's dialectic provides a suitable vocabulary for understanding the dynamics involved, though I do not wish to overstate the contribution that a dialectic-based approach can make to understanding and mapping change, for change in a police force owes everything to the political realities and organisational dynamics of the force concerned; policing is contingent on political developments such as the election of a new president or the appointment of a new inspector general, though these rarely represent dramatic discontinuities. Nor can one theoretical framework explain the difficulties of sustaining or managing change, or the political need to balance change with continuity, let alone compensate for the shallow basis on which arguments for change are typically made. Even so, an explanation structured around dialectical terms adds clarity to what is otherwise a confusing (and often contradictory) picture of political statements, organisational change and speculation. Above all, it emphasises that change projects are interactive processes that move backwards and sideways as well as forwards.

This links into Giddens' point that 'all forms of dependence offer some resources whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of their superiors', and this he calls 'the dialectic of control in social systems' (Giddens, 1984, p. 16). Giddens' structuration theory offers value here because it lends equal weight to the influence of structure and agency, with the two mutually implicated in, and constituted by, the same social (and, in this case, occupational) practices. It notes that structure is implicated in action through agents drawing upon structural properties – rules and resources – so reproducing structures, though these do not have a real existence. However, while structure provides the conditions for action, and is also the outcome of action, it is not clear why it should always be open to the possibility of transformation (compare Vaughan, 2001).

In practice, none of these approaches explicitly engages with the most significant attribute of police systems: resilience. Contrary to notions such as tipping points, with its emphasis on dramatic discontinuities, resilience alludes to the capability of a system or individual to absorb shocks without shifting to another path. It is about elasticity – and police forces are nothing if not adaptive. As the re-emergence of Somali police forces after 20 years of war shows, coercive systems can absorb dramatic change and structural destruction, and still retain their purpose; they can preserve the ability to adapt to changed circumstances while fulfilling core purposes even when the institution on which they are thought to depend is non-existent (Hills, 2014). Despite the current vogue to transform police, it has long been recognised that police systems are characterised by persistence and impermeability, with police filtering back, 'like water rising through sand, both in terms of the forms of administration and the very personnel themselves' (Bayley, 1975, p. 372).

It is not clear how resilience relates to Hall's varieties of causation but it alludes to the tactical flexibility and strategies police use for minimising damage, and the utility of coercive resources for regimes and social orders. Used in this sense, its meaning is closer to stability as equilibrium than to terms such as resistance, which focus on under-class politics and are partial in both senses of the word. The literature associated with resistance may be helpful in that it distinguishes between public transcripts (Scott, 1990, p. 2) and hidden transcripts (p. 4), but it adds little to the rich material associated with, for example, the canteen culture identified by police studies (Waddington, 1999).

Imagined Futures

The resilience of police systems makes the flawed results of reform projects understandable. It also suggests that reform projects are best understood as being based on productive causation because they act primarily as indicators of the international community's search for development and progress; they represent an imagined future in which security and access to justice are available for all (e.g. DFID, 2014). This in turn raises the question of whether police perspectives on the future affect officers' attitudes to change: What future do officers want? How is it identified, articulated and operationalised? What goes into planning an unknowable future? How influential is the past on ideas of the future?

For most, policing is a job in a world with few opportunities to access desirable resources. Some may work 'to save the future' (compare Hills, 2012b, p. 63), but most focus on feeding their families, avoiding risks to their career (Hills, 2012b; Owen, 2015) and (in the case of Mogadishu's police) getting the vehicles and weaponry they need to survive today (Hills, 2014).

In recent years a literature has emerged from sociology and anthropology on time lines (e.g. the Economic and Social Research Council's five-year qualitative longitudinal study, *Timescapes*) and personal histories (Yarrow, 2008b), but our knowledge of the future as an imagined landscape for policing is minimal. We know little about contingency planning in established forces such as Nigeria's, and nothing about the equivalent in Mogadishu's. At best, evidence is anecdotal.

Since nothing remains unchanged, what, then, persuades some officers to promote or tolerate change? What might they recognise as a desirable form of system-wide emergence? Ironically, discussions with six mid-ranking Nigerian officers over the course of several years suggest that some regard change as desirable because it is perceived to offer hope for a better future, though this may well be understood in terms of a safer working environment or entrepreneurial opportunities reliant on negotiation, informal relationships and opaque decision-making, rather than in terms of the technical and normative terms aligned to liberal goals and experience.

Conclusions

To date, my research on the nature and logic of institutional and political change in Africa suggests that, in police development at least, the application of notions such as emergence and tipping points is essentially a Western attempt to identify phenomena capable of facilitating politically-desirable forms of progress. Not only are police superbly resilient, accommodating or subverting unwanted change and reproducing, rather than creating, order, but also dramatic discontinuities are not inherently transformative. Fragility does not necessarily produce novelty or tipping points.

Ultimately, police development displays a dialectical logic which suggests that mechanistic Western explanations of causality represent the pursuit of imagined futures whereas Africa's are more comprehensive, teleological and hybrid. This generalisation cautions against the assumption that emergence and tipping points are indicators of, or explanations for, change.



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Insights

Insights is edited by Barbara Graziosi, IAS Director and Professor of Classics.
Correspondence should be directed to Pauline Edmondson (pauline.edmondson@durham.ac.uk)