

Preprint of:

Book chapter: von Soest, Christian: Neopatrimonialism: A Critical Assessment

In: Hout, Wil/Hutchinson, Jane (eds.): Elgar Handbook on Governance and Development

Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, to be published 2021

Neopatrimonialism: A Critical Assessment

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Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to present the main features of the post-Weberian neopatrimonialism concept and to assess its primary application, particularly in describing and analysing social, economic and political development processes. The chapter first outlines the concept's origins, main characteristics and variations. This includes information on (1) its definition, (2) the delimitation of a neopatrimonial system, (3) the relationship to other concepts and (4) indicators. It then presents different strands of thinking on neopatrimonialism's effect on social, economic and political development. On this basis, the chapter asks whether and how neopatrimonialism can meaningfully be used for the comparative analysis of informal institutions. The biggest advantage of the neopatrimonialism concept is that it 'systematically links politics to the exercise of power' (Erdmann and Engel 2007: 114). Yet, it suffers from serious normative and analytical deficiencies. Other concepts have a higher value for analysing development processes.

Keywords: neopatrimonialism, informal institutions, development

1 Introduction

Researchers working in the social sciences as well as area studies have widely applied the neopatrimonialism concept to describe and, less often, to analyse the exercise of political power in different regional contexts. Such world regions include Latin America, the Middle East, Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, Central Asia and, most notably, sub-Saharan Africa. The widespread use of the concept has created a voluminous and diverse body of literature.

The term ‘neopatrimonialism’ was first coined by Eisenstadt (1973); the Google Books Ngram Viewer (2021) shows the exponential rise of its use from the beginning of the 1990s onwards. Up to now, only in 2002 and 2016 were there fewer books published that used the word ‘neopatrimonialism’ than in preceding years. Particularly at the beginning of the 2000s, social scientists (particularly political scientists), policymakers and development practitioners widely used the neopatrimonialism concept to make sense of governance, and of social, economic and political developments in non-OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) regions. Neopatrimonialism’s growing prominence went hand in hand with (a) the ‘rediscovery of the state’ (Evans et al. 1985) and the increasing realisation that it is indispensable for long-term development (World Bank 1997) and (b) a focus on how rule is exercised as well as prevalent conceptions of ‘good governance’ to strengthen societies’ development prospects (Neumayer 2002).

Prominent scholars applying the concept assert that distinct features distinguish governance in particular states and regions, for instance in sub-Saharan Africa, from the form it takes in their counterparts in other world regions (e.g. Bayart 1993; Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Chabal and Daloz 1999; van de Walle 2001). The term neopatrimonialism denotes the simultaneous operation of two Weberian ideal types of authority: patrimonial (a subtype of traditional domination) and legal-rational domination (Weber 1922 [2005]: 159–60, 167, 175–8). In other words, the basic proposition is that formal state institutions are fused with informal, particularistic politics of rulers. All definitions stress this personal nature of politics (Jackson and Rosberg 1984; Roth 1968).

Yet scholarly agreement ends here; several publications have been highly critical of the concept, in particular of its application as a heuristic, a descriptive or an analytical tool for gaining insights into governance – particularly in non-OECD states (deGrassi 2008; Mkandawire 2015; Pitcher et al. 2009; Therkildsen 2005). Researchers have recurrently criticised the ‘catch all’ or ‘deus ex machina’ use of the concept (Erdmann and Engel 2007; see

also Theobald 1982 on ‘patrimonialism’).

This chapter aims to provide an assessment of the current state of research using the concept of neopatrimonialism and its relationship to social, economic and political development processes. On this basis, it asks whether and how neopatrimonialism can meaningfully be used for the comparative analysis of the exercise of rule and informal institutions. It argues that the concept suffers from serious analytical and normative deficiencies. Other concepts have a higher value for analysing development processes.

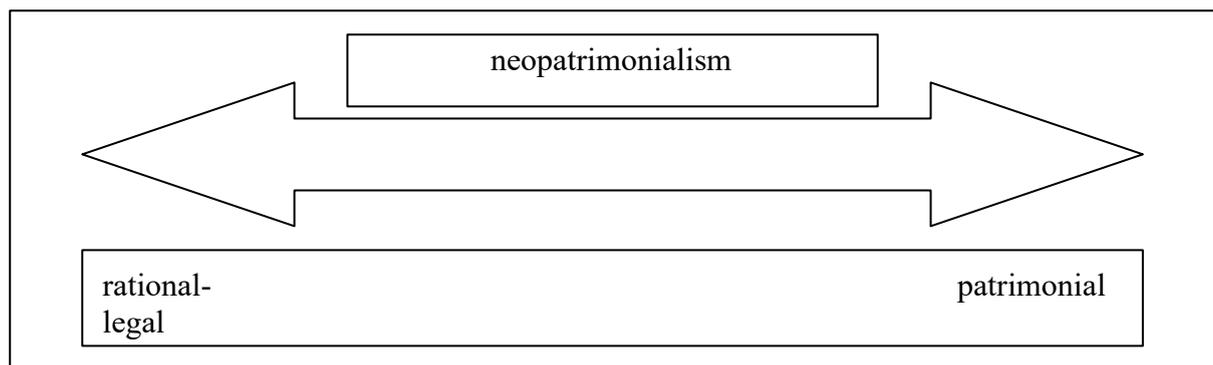
2 Features of the Neopatrimonialism Concept and its Application

Neopatrimonialism denotes the overlapping of different logics of authority, of patrimonialism and legal-rational domination. Following Weber’s (1922 [2005]: 173–5) conceptualisation, the ideal type of patrimonialism connotes that a patron confers gifts on followers to attain and strengthen their loyalty. Clients, in turn, obtain material benefits and protection in exchange for their support. In a polity that is dominated by these exchanges, ‘patrimonial domination is exercised by a ruler with the help of an administrative staff. [...] In other words, the patriarchal logic is used beyond the kinship ties, on a larger scale’ (Médard 1982: 178). The connection between patron and client is inherently unequal; Rothchild (1986) therefore described this relationship as a ‘hegemonial exchange’.

The ‘neo’ in neopatrimonialism relates to the coexistence of formal institutions and rational-legal rule with patrimonial relations. Patrons typically are office holders who use public funds and/or the power of being in office to build a personal following allowing them to stay in power (Therkildsen 2005: 37). Thus a ‘modern façade’ coexists with deeply ingrained, often countervailing, informal logics (Cammack 2007). Social practice, as a result, is fundamentally different compared to the impersonal formal rules which are supposed to guide official action. However it is essential not to treat informal institutions as pathological, but analytically as norms which can produce conflicting (but potentially also supporting) rules, expectations and sanctions (Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Lauth 2000). Therefore, contrasting rational-legal and patrimonial domination in a binary way is insufficient,¹ as their fusion – to varying degrees – is the main characteristic of neopatrimonial regimes. Visually speaking, neopatrimonialism oscillates on a continuum between the two extreme poles of rational-legal and patrimonial rule (see Figure 1).

¹ See the critique of several governance conceptions in Engel and Olsen (2005).

Figure 1. Neopatrimonial Continuum



Source: von Soest (2009: 39).

Two consequences follow from this reasoning: First, it is inappropriate to downplay the rational-legal aspect of neopatrimonialism as Chabal and Daloz (1999) do in their widely cited book *Africa Works*. In a sweeping statement, they assert that ‘in most African countries, the state is no more than a décor, a pseudo-Western façade masking the realities of deeply personalized relations’ (Chabal and Daloz 1999: 17). Second, the inherent consequence of this simultaneous interaction of different logics of rule is fundamental insecurity or lack of calculability (Therkildsen 2005), at least for outsiders, about what behaviour to expect from public officials. Hence, neopatrimonialism’s effects for social, economic and political development might vary and be highly context-specific.

2.1 Delimiting a neopatrimonial system

As the concept of neopatrimonialism makes heuristic claims about public officials and state institutions, the state is the natural point of departure for any analysis of neopatrimonial relations. As a political sociology concept, the relationship between state and society is of key importance (Chazan et al. 1992; Migdal 2001). Scholars have attempted to incorporate additional factors, such as international influences and donor policies (Cammack 2007; Schlichte 2005; von Soest 2007) as well as ‘new social spaces’ (Engel and Mehler 2005), but even in these assessments the state remains the basic starting point for analysis.

Furthermore, neopatrimonial rule is institutionalised: that is, it has a rule and a sanctioning component (North 1990). Informal practice functions as a deeply ingrained logic of action which cannot be removed or changed by individual actors easily. Going by this logic, even a state president – who would qualify as the most important patron – cannot change this pattern as he or she pleases as other actors rely on and expect patrimonial exchange. Much literature from the 1990s and beginning of the new century dealing with the concept claimed that these exchange relations are widespread in non-OECD regions and in sub-Saharan Africa in

particular. Bratton and van de Walle (1997: 277), for instance, maintained that ‘the distinctive institutional hallmark of African regimes is neopatrimonialism’. For Clapham (1985: 49) neopatrimonialism was even ‘the most salient type [of rule] in the Third World’.

In order to substantiate these claims, there is a consequent need to specify when exactly a political system is termed neopatrimonial. Which mix of rational-legal and patrimonial strategies must exist? However, the literature is almost completely silent on thresholds that determine the designation of a given polity ‘neopatrimonial’. Considering the obvious problem in clearly specifying informal institutions and coherently surveying heterogeneous state institutions, two points of reference, a functional and a historical one, might help to characterise such a system:

- On the cross-sectional level, neopatrimonial practices must be found in various instances of a state, for instance in more than half of its institutions. Obviously, as states are not monolithic, this assessment requires a strong qualitative dimension.
- Neopatrimonialism must have been historically entrenched. Following this longitudinal dimension, this logic must have been dominant for far longer than one legislative period for a given state to be termed ‘neopatrimonial’.

These are still very general qualifications; they may serve as a starting point for further thinking about delimiting ‘neopatrimonial states’ from those where patrimonial relations are not dominant (rational-legal system) or are completely pervasive (patrimonial/sultanistic system) (Chehabi and Linz 1998; Roth 1968). In addition, Bach (2011) suggests to differentiate between regulated (limited) and predatory forms of neopatrimonialism.² Yet, these differentiations exemplify the difficulties to clearly delimit neopatrimonial ‘systems’ for the purposes of analysis.

Political domination versus regime type

A clear consensus has emerged that neopatrimonialism is not a regime type *sui generis*. Rather, it is a mixture of Weberian ‘pure types of legitimate authority’ (Weber 1922 [2005]: 159) that is orthogonal to the common differentiation of democracy, hybrid regimes and autocracy (or other typologies) (in contrast, for the Middle East, see Bank and Richter 2010). Geddes et al.’s (2014) ‘personalist’ authoritarian regime type comes closest to representing a neopatrimonial system (see also, Grundholm 2020).

² Bach follows Médard’s (2000) initial ‘taxonomy based on the mode and intensity of the regulation of patrimonial practices’ (Bach 2011: 277).

As patrimonialism induces fundamental insecurity about the behaviour of state officials and therefore abrogates the rule of law, it is incompatible with the realisation of a liberal democracy. Thus, as a dominating practice, neopatrimonialism can only be found in hybrid or autocratic regimes (Erdmann and Engel 2007). (On the other hand, an autocratic system is not necessarily dominated by neopatrimonial strategies.) In fact, as a political sociology concept, neopatrimonialism moves beyond traditional regime typologies and seeks to provide information about power relations and *how* rule is exercised in hybrid and autocratic regimes.

2.2 Relationship to other concepts

Stating that neopatrimonialism is characterised by the simultaneous operation of patrimonial and rational-legal domination does not resolve the ‘problem of specificity’ (Erdmann and Engel 2007: 114). Are there different modes of neopatrimonial practice? How does it relate to other approaches? The three concepts ‘clientelism’, ‘patronage’ and ‘corruption’ have found wide application in social science analysis of both OECD and, in particular, developing countries and are sometimes used interchangeably. I argue that neopatrimonialism is the general concept encompassing clientelism, patronage and corruption as specific modalities (Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Eisenstadt 1973; Erdmann and Engel 2007; von Soest 2009).

Clientelism – ‘the exchange or the brokerage of specific services and resources for political support, often in the form of votes’ (Erdmann and Engel 2007: 104) – is based on personal relations between patron and client. As the two terms imply, this relationship is asymmetric (Kettering 1988; Lemarchand and Legg 1972; Médard 1982). Clientelism does not necessarily have a strong redistributive effect; particularly in the African context, scholars often understand it as ‘symbolic’ exchange (van de Walle 2003: 311–3). Patronage semantically takes the viewpoint of the patron as its point of departure. In common usage, it alludes more specifically to the particularistic provision of jobs in the public administration.

Corruption is another symptom of neopatrimonialism.³ Scholars stress the ubiquity of the phenomenon in autocratic and, in particular, hybrid regimes (McMann et al. 2020). The encyclopaedic definition denotes corruption as ‘misuse of public power for private gain’ (Rose-Ackerman 1999: 91). A more specific conceptualisation focuses on the transaction between private and public sector actors through which collective goods are illegally converted into private pay offs. Following this narrower understanding, corruption takes place at the point of interaction between state and non-state actors (Rose-Ackerman 1978: 85–8). Bureaucratic

³ In contrast, other scholars see corruption as the general term encompassing other modalities such as clientelism (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015).

corruption and political corruption tend to exist simultaneously, and to be mutually reinforcing.

As an informal practice which runs counter to formal institutions, neopatrimonialism weakens institutional safeguards against corruption. Weak formal institutions in turn make corruption a ‘high-profit, low risk activity’ (Kpundeh 2004: 125). Substantive research (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015) has shown that what can be qualified as individual instances of corruption in fact often is the institutionalised behaviour of state agents practised to meet conflicting individual and societal demands.

2.3 Indicators

Neopatrimonialism is a universal concept, which despite being predominantly used to describe political relations in particular regional contexts and developing countries makes a claim to account for governance in potentially all settings and world regions. For this endeavour, it is essential to establish the concepts ‘hard core’ and its ‘protective belt’ (Lakatos 1978), which can be altered without violating the concept’s foundational characteristics.

Reflecting the multiple understandings of neopatrimonialism that exist, a plethora of indicators have been proposed and used. To start with, it is useful to distinguish analytically between the political and the administrative arena of governance as the two spheres operate with different rationalities. To a large degree, the implementation politics is ‘routinised’ through an administrative staff. That is to say, rational-legal authority predominantly is the bureaucracy (Weber 1922 [2005]: 162, 1035, 1047). Neopatrimonialism on the administrative level can principally be thought of as deviations from Weber’s ideal type of bureaucracy (Weber 1922 [2005]: 160–3).⁴ His conceptualisation involves a clear separation between the private and the public sphere, and focuses on the ‘qualification’ of the bureaucracy’s civil servants (*Beamte*) (Weber 1922 [2005]: 161–2). As a basic feature, rational-legal domination follows clearly specified procedures: it is rule-bound and depersonalised. Following this reasoning, five principles characterise the bureaucracy:

- (1) a high degree of specialisation,
- (2) hierarchical authority structure with limited areas of command and responsibility,
- (3) impersonality of relationships between organizational members,
- (4) recruitment of officials on the basis of technical expertise and

⁴ Weber (1922 [2005]: 160) acknowledges that none of the three ideal types can be found in ‘pure’ form in reality. Deviation is thus a matter of degree, and not of principle.

(5) differentiation of private household and public income (Mouzelis 1967: 39).⁵

Two aspects are of particular interest: human-resource policy (recruitment and progression of civil servants; appointment of senior staff) and the day-to-day business of the administration and whether it is autonomous from political and societal interventions (for a complex conceptualisation, see Evans 1995; Evans and Rauch 1999).

It is far more difficult to systematically assess and compare neopatrimonialism in the political arena. Bratton/van de Walle (1997: 63–8), focusing on the African context, proposed three informal practices as being constitutive of a neopatrimonial system: (1) concentration of political power⁶; (2) systematic clientelism; and (3) particularistic use of state resources. They can be used to establish the neopatrimonial profile of a country on the political level (von Soest 2009).

Two of the indicators briefly presented here focus on the ministerial cabinet, which often serves as the key locus of particularistic practices – at least in many African states (van de Walle 2001: 32–3). First, the ‘concentration of political power’ implies the dominance of one individual, who controls policies as well as politics and single-handedly appoints individuals to public positions (Bratton and van de Walle 1997: 63). The ruler ‘resists delegating all but the most trivial decision-making tasks’ (Bratton and van de Walle 1997: 63). As a defining feature of this ‘big man politics’, at least in Africa (Hyden 2006: 94–115; Driscoll 2020), the president – or, in other words, patron – stays in power for a long time, sometimes until the end of his or her life if the country’s constitution allows.

In other neopatrimonial systems, for instance those found in Southeast Asia, it is often oligarchic elites – for example, landowners, political dynasties and economic elites – who dominate the political landscape. In these systems, the patron at the apex of the state is recruited from the oligarchic elite or must deal with oligarchic elites outside the state apparatus (Hutchcroft 1998: 46–55). Additionally, neopatrimonial ‘big men’ – at least in Africa – frequently rotate the political elite in order to prevent any potential opponent from developing his/her own power base, and to extend the clientelist network (Bratton and van de Walle 1997: 75; Snyder and Mahoney 1999). The fulfilment of both requirements – a long tenure of presidents and a short tenure of key government members – points to the informal power

⁵ Weber’s full list includes ten characteristics: 1) personally free and subject to authority; 2) hierarchy; 3) clearly defined sphere of competence; 4) free selection; 5) technical qualifications; 6) fixed salaries; 7) primary occupation; 8) system of promotion; 9) separated from ownership; and 10) systematic discipline (Weber 1922 [2005]: 162–3).

⁶ Bratton and van de Walle term this feature ‘presidentialism’. This, however, is misleading, as the traditional political science definition refers to the direct election of the president by the electorate.

concentration of a neopatrimonial system.

The second component is ‘systematic clientelism’, meaning the distribution of public resources through public sector jobs, licences, contracts and projects by the patron in order to consolidate his or her rule. In these environments, the president secures loyalty through an ‘extensive network of personal patronage, rather than through ideology or impersonal law’ (Snyder 1992: 379). This practice may be observed through analysing the size and the structure of a country’s cabinet, a body which often acts as a focal point for awarding personal favours to the political elite. As outlined by van de Walle (2005: 83), the tendency of cabinets to grow is ‘mirrored by an increase in the size of other national bodies’. Thus, in addition to studying the growth of the cabinet, the size of the whole public administration and of state-owned enterprises can be scrutinised too.

The particularistic use of state resources constitutes the third feature of neopatrimonial practice. According to Bratton and van de Walle (1997: 66), neopatrimonial presidents make ‘little distinction between the public and private coffers, routinely and extensively dipping into the state treasury for their own political needs’. It is particularly difficult to find macro-level indicators for the hidden practice of using public office for private benefit. For instance, high state consumption (compared to state investment) might not only be indicative of neopatrimonial practices but could also be attributed to a mere short-term time horizon of the executive. Some scholars therefore use the extent of ‘sovereignty expenditures’ – such as the expenses of the diplomatic service – as a proxy (van de Walle 2005). The particularistic appropriation of public funds – assessed, for instance, through the existence of special funds over which only the president has discretion, sometimes called ‘slush funds’ – can be used as a further indicator (van Donge 2008; von Soest 2009).

Finally, for want of more precise indicators, expert surveys on the perceived level of corruption – such as Transparency International’s controversial Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) and the similar ‘control of corruption’ component of the World Bank Governance Index (World Bank 2021), or representative surveys such as Afrobarometer (2021) – are used to gauge the extent of perceived corruption. Yet, all these measures are broad in scope and lump together grand and petty corruption (and not only measure corruption at the political level). Given the lack of reliable indicators, current research has increasingly tried to compile a new generation of more objective corruption measures – such as data on public procurement (Fazekas et al. 2016; Mungiu-Pippidi 2016). The downside, however, is that such information is often not yet available for numerous countries.

3 Neopatrimonialism's Effect on Social, Economic and Political Development

The preceding section has established how difficult it is to exactly pin down and comparatively analyse purported neopatrimonial relationships, particularly on a broad country level and in the political arena. Nevertheless, scholars with different epistemological backgrounds⁷ and methodological orientations have examined the 'effect' of patron–client relations on social, economic and political development. Assessing neopatrimonialism's effects, two main strands have emerged: the first dealing with stumbling blocks for economic and social development and the second assessing the political consequences and the repercussions for the public administration.

3.1 Effects on economic and social development

As analyses of neopatrimonialism's economic effects abound, the following representation has to be selective. The main thrust of neopatrimonial arguments is that office holders extract rents for their own personal benefit and for sustaining the support of their clients. This causes economic stagnation and prevents the state from adopting economic reforms and creating the conditions conducive to private investment and growth. In other words, private accumulation and rent-seeking (Khan and Sundaram 2000) take precedence over public investment and macroeconomic stability.

The gist of the argument is that arbitrary decisions create fundamental insecurity for economic actors, which in turn inhibits capital accumulation, investment and economic activity independent of the state. Going by this reasoning, in neopatrimonial systems rulers have a short time horizon, are not interested in investment and the creation of public goods, and thus incite a 'politics of permanent crisis' (van de Walle 2001). Some scholars even speak about the 'privatization' (Hibou 2004) or 'criminalization' (Bayart et al. 1999) of the state. This also accounts for the lacking success of numerous development-assistance programmes in different contexts (Cammack 2007).

The 'African Politics and Power' programme (2007–2012), led by the Overseas Development Institute (Booth and Cammack 2013) and funded by the British Department for International Development (DFID) and Irish Aid, and the 'Tracking Development' programme (2006–2012) at Leiden University (van Donge et al. 2012), funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, conducted in-depth analyses of neopatrimonialism's economic consequences. The Tracking

⁷ The classic sociological differentiation – based on Weber (1988) – between more interpretative approaches and more positivist perspectives can also be found in research on neopatrimonialism and patron–client relations.

Development project compared pairwise experiences in sub-Saharan African and Southeast Asian countries. It found that ‘sustained growth has consistently been associated with policies aimed at (i) macroeconomic stabilisation; (ii) improving life in the rural sector, increasing agricultural productivity and ensuring an ample supply of food; and (iii) liberalising the economy and creating conditions of economic freedom, particularly for peasant farmers and other small actors’ (van Donge et al. 2012: 5). In the less successful (African) cases, these policies were not consistently pursued.

However, in itself neopatrimonialism cannot account for these divergent paths. For one, in both regions rent-seeking and patron–client relations structured political behaviour. As neopatrimonialist explanations lack specificity and lump together different practices, ‘these factors do not seem to have any particular explanatory value’ (van Donge et al. 2012: 18). The same was found in pairwise comparisons of how particularistic politics in countries in Latin America, Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa affect the strength of the tax administration (von Soest et al. 2011). The decisions and orientations of the political elite, or what is often called ‘political will’ (Persson and Sjöstedt 2012), seem to make the main difference here.

It was found that ubiquitous exchange relations are not necessarily a hindrance to long-term planning horizons, macroeconomic stability, investment and, in consequence, economic development. Responding to these research findings, scholars coined the term ‘developmental neopatrimonialism’ (Henley 2015; Kelsall 2011). As argued by Kelsall (2011: 84), ‘research shows that provided rent management can be centralised and oriented to the long term, neopatrimonialism is compatible with strong economic performance. We can confidently assert, then, that in some cases neopatrimonialism can be harnessed for developmental ends.’ With its argument to ‘go with the grain’ (Kelsall 2010; Levy 2014), meaning to work with restricted forms of neopatrimonialism that are in line with economic growth rather than instead trying to completely overhaul governance systems, the African Politics and Power programme left a strong imprint on Western – and in particular, British – development policy. This is reminiscent of Bach’s (2011) notion of ‘regulated neopatrimonialism’ (in contrast to ‘predatory neopatrimonialism’).

However, these authors acknowledge themselves that there are limits in the extent to which patron–client relations can be matched with economic development. Their argumentation at times even feels circular: ‘Other states, like Equatorial Guinea or Congo-Brazzaville, may have administrations in which professional standards have been so eroded by economic decline and political interference, that they have fallen below a threshold at which developmental

patrimonialism is conceivable' (Kelsall 2011: 82). In a similar vein, Mkandawire (2015: 16) found that '[m]any features of the African state highlighted by the literature, such as clientelism and presidentialism, are salient aspects of successful developmental states.'

One advantage of the 'developmental neopatrimonialism' perspective, however, is that it stresses potential advancement under particularistic dispensations, and reduces pervasive negative perspectives of neopatrimonialism and misreading of Weber's ideal types (Bach 2011; Pitcher et al. 2009). Not all conditions of what is often called 'good governance' need to be met to achieve development (Grindle 2004). 'Developmental neopatrimonialism' does not, though, systematically explain under which conditions political actors constrain particularistic exchange relations, create 'the intent' to facilitate broader economic development (Henley 2015) or reveal how particularistic exchanges interact with other factors.

3.2 Effects on political development and the public administration

Most analyses find that a pervasive system of neopatrimonialism is incompatible with the realisation of liberal democracy, while patrimonial exchange relations can potentially be found in all political systems – particularly, as noted, in hybrid and autocratic ones. Although there is a general assumption that particularistic relations are bad for democracy, macro analyses provide contrasting findings on the link between the two. Most recently, Sigman and Lindberg (2017) observed that neopatrimonialism is 'no major hindrance' to democratic development in sub-Saharan Africa. They operationalise neopatrimonial practices on the macro level with reference to Bratton and van de Walle (1997), specifically via the three dimensions power concentration ('presidentialism'), clientelism and the use of public resources for private/political gain introduced above (see also, Langkilde and Knudsen 2013; von Soest 2009).

In line with this chapter, these authors argue that there is need for disaggregation so as to account for the huge variation within and between states in assessing the political effects of neopatrimonialism. The same holds true in reverse direction, namely regarding how democracy and democratic institutions reduce clientelism, corruption and neopatrimonialism more broadly (Alence 2004; McMann et al. 2020). For instance, clientelist voter–politician linkages entail a reciprocal element and might plant the seed for more symmetrical relationships eventually emerging (Kitschelt 2000; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). However, Lindberg's (2003) research on members of parliament in Ghana, one of the African continent's most democratic polities, showed that patronage politics around elections (a) have increased in the country's period of democratic rule and (b) threatens different aspects of democratic consolidation. Similarly, Abdulai and Hickey (2016) found that incentives generated by 'competitive

clientelism' still dominate the allocation of resources in Ghana's democratic politics.

Even in relation to neopatrimonialism's effect on public sector performance, the repercussions of patron–client relations have not been evenly spread (Therkildsen 2005). For one, undue political interventions might not be the only nor the most decisive determinant, lowering administrative capability in developing countries as some scholars argue (Chabal and Daloz 1999: 5–6). The public administration might, for instance, suffer from genuine resource constraints. Second, even in highly neopatrimonial environments it is possible to construct and safeguard effective public administration agencies – that is, 'pockets of effectiveness' (Roll 2013). In sum, one pervasive problem of much work invoking the neopatrimonialism framework is that it bundles together different phenomena and, as a consequence, overgeneralises when making claims about the practice's purported effects on developmental processes. Methodologically, there is the tendency to substantiate sweeping claims 'using selective anecdotes' (deGrassi 2008: 109).

4 Conclusion: The Usefulness of the Neopatrimonialism Concept

The biggest advantage of the neopatrimonialism concept is that it 'systematically links politics to the exercise of power which is a core subject in political science' (Erdmann and Engel 2007: 114). It allows for the analysis of different forms of exerting authority and transcends broad regime typologies stretching between democracies and autocracies. With its universal claim the concept furthermore in general permits comparative analysis, also across different world regions ('travelling of concepts') (von Soest and Stroh 2018). On the other hand, the concept and its application are plagued by serious deficiencies on the analytical and the normative levels.

On the analytical one, at least without further specification, the concept of neopatrimonialism is *too broad* as it encompasses very different practices. This feature is detrimental to the concept's analytical value. With respect to patrimonialism, Theobald (1982: 554, 555) early on criticised that 'rather than isolating a socio-political phenomenon, it tends to gloss over substantial differences'. To him, 'it has become something of a catch-all concept, in danger of losing its analytical utility' (Theobald 1982: 554, 555; see also the forceful critique in Mkandawire 2015). Indeed, with its broad claim of fusing patrimonial and rational-legal domination within the state, neopatrimonialism falls short of the requirement that it should link different expressions 'to variations in observable outcomes' (Therkildsen 2005: 38).

Informal politics is highly context-specific and path dependent. First, its manifestations vary

from country to country (*inter-country difference*), between state organisations in one country (*intra-country difference*) and between different points in time (*inter-temporal difference*). Second, some facets of neopatrimonialism do not seem to be universal; at least some of its expressions are different across countries and world regions, for instance whether there is one big man or alternatively an oligarchic elite at the apex of the state (Crouch 1979). Finally, neopatrimonialism is highly fluid. An example from Zambia illustrates this point: In 1994, the semi-autonomous Zambia Revenue Authority (ZRA) replaced the former state-integrated tax administration (Cheelo and Hinfelaar 2020; von Soest 2007). In general, the ZRA has reduced particularistic practices with respect to the collection of taxes. Yet, political interventions – and, in consequence, the ZRA’s performance – have strongly fluctuated since its inception (Cheelo and Hinfelaar 2020).

The question about the developmental effects of the ‘elusive’ (Erdmann and Engel 2007) practice of neopatrimonialism on public policy is too general and, consequently, not falsifiable. The consequences of particularistic relations can only be assessed with respect to particular instances of public policy and/or public administration. Furthermore, the approach leaves a number of important questions unanswered. The first is human agency in shaping the extent of particularistic exchange relations. Despite the existence of reciprocal expectations between patrons and clients, it is obvious that rulers’ decisions should make a huge difference. What factors influence their calculus (to potentially restrict particularistic exchanges)? Second, and relatedly, the perspective of clients and issues of legitimacy remain underexamined (Pitcher et al. 2009). Third, patron–broker–client networks are hardly assessed in a systematic way, for instance through network analysis.

It is important to, in Sartori’s (1994) words, go down the ladder of abstraction. Promising research strategies in that regard are ethnographic assessments of ‘everyday corruption’ (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006), comparisons of the ‘historical patterns of political development’ in, for instance, African states (Allen 1995: 301), and analyses of patron–client relationships in particular settings. For example, scholars have devised rigorous research designs to examine how clientelist exchanges affect citizens’ voting choices (Lindberg 2010; Wantchekon 2003). Systematic approaches have also been applied to examine particularistic relations on the macro level (Abdulai and Hickey 2016; Booth and Cammack 2013; Sigman and Lindberg 2017; von Soest 2007). Yet for this kind of research, it is not necessary to draw on the concept of neopatrimonialism.

Much of the neopatrimonialism work is not only too broad but, at the same time, also *too*

narrow. The thoughtful conceptual critique of deGrassi (2008) is still valid. He asserts that when focusing on patron–client relations, there is ‘the tendency to ignore or downplay other axes of social difference—such as race, gender, religion, and youth—which are all often vitally important’ (deGrassi 2008: 120; see also, Mkandawire 2015: 602). Furthermore, ‘clients’ might resist patrons’ claims. For instance, as Scott (1990) reminds us in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, citizens do not necessarily ‘buy’ rulers’ claims to power but may instead revert to both overt and covert forms of resistance.

Second, there are important normative challenges levelled against the neopatrimonialism framework. Not only is it analytically unprecise, but the dominant use of the concept often measures the ‘state in operation’ against an unrealistic rational-legal ideal type. Pitcher et al. (2009) warn that the prevalent use of ‘neopatrimonialism’ involves a misreading of Weber’s conceptualisation of patrimonialism as a traditional, *legitimate* type of authority. Even more importantly, the concept ‘tends toward a deterministically pessimistic view of development in Africa with the logic of neopatrimonialism unavoidably pushing the analysis toward ontological despair, hence its association with Afro-pessimism’ (Mkandawire 2015: 602). As asserted by Bach (2011: 275), in Latin America as well as Central and Southeast Asia ‘patrimonialism and neopatrimonialism have been associated with a greater axiological neutrality than in Africa due, inter alia, to the preservation of an analytical dichotomy between regulated and predatory forms of neopatrimonialism’. Scholars that describe or analyse governance in sub-Saharan Africa with the neopatrimonialism concept may well often transmit a particularly negative perception of how rule is exercised there. However, also in respect to other world regions the – at least implicit – yardstick for analysis regularly is a distant rational-legal ideal type. By implication, the result is a deterministic, gloomy view of how governance is exercised in these contexts.

Related to these normative challenges, it is noteworthy that most research on particularistic exchanges is conducted in the Global North. Apart from principal normative considerations that scientific knowledge should be produced equally around the world, researchers from the Global North may more easily make normative judgements on patron–client relations without actually fully grasping and doing justice to the context underpinning these relationships. Academics from the Global South should therefore play a greater part in analysing and evaluating such relations.

In sum, the neopatrimonialism approach suffers from serious analytical and normative deficiencies. On balance, other concepts have a higher value for analysing social, economic and political development processes. At the very least, particularistic relations must be examined in specific instances such as regarding voting behaviour, the filling of public office or public

procurement policy. For the systematic comparative analysis of how political practices affect social, economic and political development, it would be more rewarding to use analytically more precise and normatively less loaded approaches such as, on the macro level, frameworks that deal with ‘closed access orders’ (North et al. 2009) or political economy concepts such as those that focus on ‘political settlements’ (Khan 2010).

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