

Belgium was a constitutional monarchy which, despite being riven by deep social, cultural and ethnic divisions (workers vs. capitalists, Catholics vs. liberals, Flemings vs. Walloons), had found a way to hold itself together. This relative political stability enabled its rulers to build themselves an empire: tiny Belgium got to plunder the heart of Africa. The ability to build an empire enabled Belgium’s rulers to offset some of the risks of domestic political instability. It was a poisonous compact. Acemoglu and Robinson are right to say that nothing in politics is inevitable: bad political outcomes are no more predetermined than good ones. Inclusive states don’t have to export violence and exploitation. However, the historical record shows that they often do.

Inclusivity is no sort of political panacea. It is hard to achieve. It is hard to translate. Sometimes it is hard even to identify. Though the difference between inclusive and extractive states is often clear (South vs. North Korea), it can be very difficult to know where to classify individual states (just as it can be hard to say whether an individual person is healthy or not). Which, for instance, is contemporary South Africa? Apartheid South Africa was self-evidently an extractive regime. But since 1991 South Africa has mixed constitutional reform with continuing economic exclusion. For an ostensibly inclusive state the country has yet to extend the advantages of its political transformation to large numbers of its citizens, who remain very disadvantaged. Poor, black South Africans are both better off than they have ever been and no better off than they have ever been. By contrast, the present Chinese state is

essentially an extractive regime – the Chinese Communist Party does not take it in turns to rule and is plagued with corruption as a result – yet its rulers have tried to include as many Chinese as possible in the benefits of the country’s growing prosperity. China is currently investing heavily in Africa, including in the DRC, which has seen significant improvements to parts of its infrastructure. (China is certainly putting much more money into the rest of Africa than the South African government is.) At the same time China is extracting large amounts of Africa’s natural resources for its own domestic use. The Chinese are playing a double game in Africa. It will take a long time to know who the winners and the losers are.