

ASR Forum: The Life and Work of Joel Barkan

Introduction

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Joel Barkan was an important figure in Africanist political science and one of the world's leading experts on East Africa. He died suddenly in January 2014 while on holiday in Mexico, aged seventy-two. At the time, he was still involved in myriad projects both academic and policy oriented, his energies undimmed. In addition to contributing to the literature on African politics, Barkan was a passionate friend of Africa, inspiring students on all sides of the Atlantic to study the continent. Following his death, a headline in the best selling Kenyan newspaper, *The Daily Nation*, read "In Memory of Joel Barkan: A Scholar Who Believed in Kenya's Greatness."

This ASR Forum explores the lasting legacy of his wide-ranging work on a number of countries including Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda, and a broad range of political institutions and phenomena. The articles contained in this forum demonstrate the continued significance of Barkan's work and its important implications for how we study elections, legislatures and development around the world, not just in Africa.

Life and Career

In 1947, at the age of six, Joel Barkan moved from Toledo to Columbus, Ohio, when his father became a professor of art at Ohio State University. His enthusiasms were many and various. He played hockey in high school and squash from college onward. Hanging out at clubs on the outskirts of the university campus, he soon became a lifelong jazz fan. Music remained an important part of Barkan's life and his tastes were eclectic: jazz, folk, the Rolling Stones, and classical music, particularly Bach. He played the violin, passing that skill on to his children. From his early twenties he skied frequently at his house in the Rockies in Colorado.

While still in high school, Barkan began to develop an interest in Africa, especially Kenya, when he audited a summer course taught by David Apter (see Throup, this issue, xxx-xxx). After graduating from Cornell, he spent a brief time in the soon-to-be independent Kenya as part of the Crossroads Africa Program, and then embarked on graduate studies with James Coleman at UCLA. His thesis and first book examined the training and career expectations of university students in Tanzania, Uganda, and Ghana.

Even before securing his Ph.D., Barkan became an assistant professor of political science at the recently established University of California, Irvine. While there, he established a political consulting firm in 1970, becoming the founding president of J.B. Burro, which, according to its brochure, "served the Democratic Party through Behavioral Science." In collaboration with James E. Bruno, a UCLA mathematician and friend, the firm claimed to provide "a unique computer analysis to help you and your campaign staff locate and increase the turnout of loyal Democrats and capture the independent vote." The firm was endorsed by the then chairman of the California Democratic Party and the chairman of the National Campaign for an Effective Congress, and its first major success was the election of President Kennedy's Harvard roommate, John V. Tunney, to the U.S. Senate. Tunney declared, "To the knowledge of old-timers in California politics, there has never been a similar effort made in any campaign in the state's history. . . . I shall always treasure the contribution which you have made, and will count my victory in great part on your efforts" (J. B. Burro 1974: 5). In 1974, Barkan and Bruno published an academic article about the election in *Western Political Quarterly*.

In 1972, Barkan moved to the University of Iowa, where he was to spend the next thirty-three years until his retirement, serving from 1981 to 1983 as both the chair of its Global Studies Program and founding director of its Center for International and Comparative Studies. He also chaired Iowa's Department of Political Science from 1985 to 1987. Throughout his academic career he energetically engaged in work on policy issues and served from January 1992 to January 1994 as the Regional Democracy and Governance Advisor for East and Southern Africa in the Nairobi office of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Barkan soon developed a case of "Potomac Fever" and expanded his consulting activities (see Harbeson, this issue, xxx-xxx), in part because he firmly believed that good policies should be informed by directly related scholarship.

Five years before his final retirement from Iowa, Barkan began to spend whole semesters in Washington, D.C. Throughout his career, he had pursued a peripatetic existence from his Iowa bailiwick, including stints as senior lecturer at the University of Dar-es-Salaam in 1973–74, as a Chercheur Associé in 1978–79 at the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques in Paris, as a research associate at the Institute for Development Studies in the University of Nairobi during the summer months of 1979 and 1980, and as a senior research fellow, first at the Centre for the Study of Developing Countries, New Delhi, in 1984, and then at the Institute for African Development and South Asia Programs at his alma mater, Cornell, in 1990.

After Barkan's two-year secondment to USAID, Washington became his home. From September 1997 to September 1998 he was a senior fellow of the Jennings Randolph Program at the United States Institute of Peace. In 2000 (and again in 2005–2006) he was a fellow at the International Forum for Democratic Studies in the National Endowment for Democracy, and in 2001–2002 he was a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars. In 2006, he also served for six months as a senior adviser to the National Democratic Institute. Nevertheless, his main engagements in Washington were with The World Bank, where from 2000 to 2008 he was the senior consultant in the Africa Region's Governance, Public Sector Reform and Capacity Building Unit, for which he co-authored two important reports on Uganda. He also served as a senior associate with the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, one of Washington's leading foreign policy think tanks.

Meanwhile, Barkan maintained his academic ties as a visiting lecturer at Princeton in 2006–2007 and as a professorial lecturer at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins in the fall semesters of 2010 and 2011. Over the last ten years he also served as an external examiner for doctoral dissertations at the Universities of Lund, Toronto, Uppsala, and Cape Town.

In Barkan's final decade he was deeply involved in the African Legislatures Project (ALP), where, with Robert Mattes and Shaheen Mozaffar, he was co-principal investigator of legislative development in seventeen African countries. This project was based at the Centre for Social Research at the University of Cape Town and funded by grants from DfID, USAID, the Heinrich Boll Foundation, and the World Bank. In a parallel undertaking that grew out of a study he directed for the World Bank in 2002, Barkan edited his final book (Barkan 2009), which presents a comparative scheme for examining the emergence of autonomous legislatures in six African countries.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s Barkan produced a plethora of research notes, reports, and publications. Always conversant with new advances in the literature on democratization, he designed a website with Paul Densham and Gerard Rushton called “Designing Better Electoral Systems for Emerging Democracies” that promoted the development and application of a spatial decision support system (SDSS) for electoral system design, with illustrations from Kenya and South Africa (see www.uiowa.edu/betterelectoralsystems). He shared this analysis Raila Odinga and other opposition politicians in Kenya during their campaign for a proportionally representative electoral system. Continuously working on a number of projects, one of his last reports identified key stress points in Kenya and Uganda, and another examined British support for the 2010 Ethiopian elections. Barkan also took part in several election observation missions in Ethiopia (June 1992), Kenya (December 1992, December 2007), Tanzania (October 1995), Uganda (June 1996), and South Africa (2004).

Always keen to contribute to the policy and academic community, Barkan became a life member of the American Political Science Association in 1973, was a member of the Council on Foreign Relations from 1997, and served as the Iowa City Foreign Relations Council President in 1989–90. He was also a member of the Research Council of the International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy from September 1994, and served the African Studies Association in various capacities, including as a member of its Board of Directors in 1990–93, as program chair for the 1995 annual meeting, and as treasurer from 2005 to 2007.

In June 2014, in recognition of their many contributions and achievements in support of international education at the University of Iowa, Barkan and his wife, Sandra Barkan, received University of Iowa Distinguished Alumni Awards. They had married on September 9, 1962, a few weeks after his return from his first visit to Kenya, just before they began their senior year at Cornell. Sandra came to play an active role in the African Literature Association as well as the ASA and later their daughter, Bronwyn, and son, Josh, accompanied them during their sojourns in Ghana, Tanzania, and Kenya.

At his death Barkan was co-chair of the Kenya Working Group, a group of civil society activists and academics in Washington, D.C., that urged the United States government to remain closely involved in affairs in Kenya, in particular, to promote human rights and democracy. In this way, Barkan was a great multitasker—politically involved and at the cutting edge of academic research.

Work

As the foregoing discussion suggests, Barkan was remarkably productive. In total, he was the author, editor, or co-editor of five books, fifty academic articles and chapters, and at least twenty-six policy studies and reports. He also authored twenty-one reviews or op-eds, starting in 1962 at the age of twenty-one with a series of pieces on politics and society in Kenya and Uganda in *The Columbus Citizen Journal*, his local newspaper.

Over the next fifty years he became one of the foremost scholars of African politics of his generation. One of Barkan’s main areas of interest was political linkage in Africa—how leaders connect to and mobilize their supporters. This led him to make important contributions to the study of elections and political mobilization, legislatures, and civil society. A distinctive feature of Barkan’s approach was treating African leaders

and voters as actors capable of making rational and informed decisions. He argued that many of the techniques used to research Europe and North America could also be applied in Africa. It was this approach that led him to conduct some of the first surveys conducted in African countries (see Kasfir, this issue, xxx–xxx), and to pursue research on topics such as devolution (see Kanyinga, this issue, xxx–xxx) and parliaments, which tended to be ignored in the authoritarian 1980s.

His refusal to exoticize the continent underpinned Barkan's optimism about Africa. Although always a realist, Barkan believed in liberal democracy and insisted that it could work in the African context. Thus his critiques of the authoritarian abuses committed by the government of President Daniel arap Moi in a desperate bid to retain power in the 1990s (see Throup, this issue, xxx–xxx) were motivated more by a frustration over wasting the potential for a flourishing political society than by any notion of Afropessimism. In this sense, one might say that his work was driven by a concern to understand the kinds of institutions and processes that would need to perform better in order to consolidate democracy in countries such as his beloved Kenya (see Hyden, this issue, xxx–xxx).

The breadth and depth of Barkan's writings on African politics is remarkable. He was one of the first scholars to highlight the fact that illiterate rural voters enjoy high levels of certain kinds of political knowledge, challenging the notion that less educated electorates cannot make informed decisions (see Cheeseman, this issue, xxx–xxx). Building on this insight, he demonstrated that most rural voters want to be “linked” to the institutions of the political center in order to benefit from economic resources. This insight, in turn, enabled him to explain why many MPs who were seen to have failed to provide sufficient “linkage” lost their seats—even in constrained one-party elections. In this way, he demonstrated that some authoritarian systems contain elements of political participation and accountability.

Barkan examined the topic of linkage in other ways as well. He analyzed decentralization and whether it results in reallocation of government expenditures, and was among the first Africanists to apply the Western concept of civil society to the continent. His work in this area was anticipated by earlier research on the rise of “self help” projects, through which Kenyans were encouraged to build schools and health clinics that the government would then take over the responsibility for running – a policy that proved to be extremely popular, but was not always effective at providing high quality public services. Later, with two co-authors he expanded the reach of this analysis through field research on “hometown” associations in three communities in western Nigeria. In many of Barkan's writing on these topics he emphasized the dynamism, creativity and resilience of African societies, and the impact of this on both political and economic developments.

However, Barkan's analysis did not always reach optimistic conclusions. For example, he was deeply concerned by the apolitical and technocratic tendencies of the African university students he surveyed (see Kasfir, this issue, xxx–xxx). He correctly predicted that the second generation of independent African leaders would take less responsibility for the direction of their societies than the first had. By “An African dilemma,” the title of his first book, he meant that he expected these African university students to “play it safe” rather than use their expensive education to play creative roles that would achieve economic and political development.

Likewise, his analysis of decentralization demonstrated the capacity of political leaders to manipulate such reforms to strengthen central control (see Kanyinga, this issue, xxx–xxx) at a time—the early 1980s—when many Western donors began to idealize such reforms as a way to tackle the overcentralized and often corrupt nature of the African state. For Barkan, taking African political actors seriously meant expecting them to be as smart as, and in some cases significantly smarter than, their European and American counterparts. He therefore emphasized the significance of institutional checks and balances, recognizing that without countervailing structures wily leaders will find ways to subvert democracy (see Hyden, this issue, xxx–xxx).

Barkan’s willingness to take institutions seriously also meant that he was one of the first researchers to argue that legislatures were “on the rise” and to point out that some parliaments were performing much better than others (see Mattes and Mozaffar, this issue, xxx–xxx). Drawing on his his analysis of political linkage in Africa and his keen understanding of the way in which political mobilization in Africa occurs, Barkan was able to show that the choice of electoral system was likely to have significant unintended consequences. He therefore argued that while proportional representation has many benefits in terms of political inclusion, it tends to increase the influence of party leaders who construct the voting lists. In order to protect the influence of rural communities, systems of proportional representation should be combined with some form of constituency-based representation, such as first-past-the-post elections, for the legislature (see Cheeseman, this issue, xxx–xxx).

As this argument demonstrates, Barkan was deeply aware of the dangers of ongoing executive dominance. Throughout the colonial and postcolonial periods both presidents and central bureaucracies had entrenched sufficient political influence to nullify the efforts of legislatures and courts to check their powers. While he argued that the Kenyan legislature was on its way to playing an independent role countervailing the executive branch, he was far more doubtful about Uganda, where President Museveni had increasingly personalized decision-making and relied on corruption to gain political support (see Kasfir, this issue, xxx–xxx). He therefore concluded that while the potential for political reform in Africa was considerable, advances in liberal democracy could also be lost.

Conclusion

Joel Barkan’s untimely death meant an end to the scores of ongoing conversations that he was engaged in with people all over the world about everything from how to prevent electoral fraud to the fate of presidential term limits and the best jazz café in Cape Town. But as this forum demonstrates, the engagement of researchers, students, and friends with his ideas is ongoing. The capacity of his work to illuminate aspects of African political life remains undimmed, which is one reason that Barkan’s publications continue to be heavily cited by those conducting survey work and institutionalist analyses of Africa today.

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