Historicising activism in late colonial and post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Introduction

When in December 2010 Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, set himself alight, he unexpectedly unleashed an extraordinary wave of political change across North Africa and the Middle East. Bouazizi's desperate act, a personal reaction both to economic desperation and personal humiliation by local government officials, symbolised for millions their anger with and alienation from unaccountable, authoritarian and corrupt states. As the so-called "Arab Spring" unfolded, what western observers took to be a campaign for liberal political rights evolved into a complex and contradictory movement whose activists demanded (amongst other things) stronger nationalist assertion against western political and cultural domination, the redistribution of wealth, increased regional autonomy, increased individual rights and the incorporation of religious teaching into state law.

In this respect, the Arab Spring closely resembles earlier waves of popular political activism in Africa—most significantly, the nationalist movements of the 1950s and early 1960s, and the pro-democracy movements of the early 1990s—which were generally characterised as singular campaigns for political self-determination. In fact, these movements were rooted in variegated demands for socio-economic change, cultural expression and individual and communitarian self-expression. Briefly and uneasily encompassed within a nationalist

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movement or pro-democratic coalition, these complex movements briefly contained within their ranks disparate, contradictory and even competing interests that made temporary common cause but which often found that the apparent successful achievement of their immediate aim did not lead to the underlying changes in politics, economy or society they had sought.

Much of this complexity has commonly been lost in histories of African political change. These have sometimes dismissed popular activism as largely irrelevant to processes of elite-driven change, or idealised it in ways that tend to remove its particularity and explore it only in relation to the broader political movement of which it formed a part. More radical elements of nationalist movements were dismissed as harbouring 'unrealistic expectations' of self-rule, whilst the pro-democracy movements of the early 1990s evolved into narrow projects for economic and political liberalisation, for reasons which are explored below. Between these two milestones, day-to-day socio-economic and cultural protests received little attention by researchers generally focused on more structural or ideological notions of political change. By refocusing on activism as process rather than as outcome, we may recapture aspects of African activism that not only provide insight into the relationship between popular and elite political organisation and ideas, but also enable instructive comparison between periods of heightened activism both within Africa and between Africa and the wider world.

The romantic and often ideologically constructed search for 'authentic' African subaltern voices has, like the nationalist historiography that preceded it, often distorted the messy contradictory realities of African associational life.[1] This article starts from the assumption that there is no straightforward relationship between specific examples of popular mass-based activism and a self-evident 'will of the people'. Indeed, one of the important themes of this

article is the interaction between local activist initiatives and dominant discourses of political change primarily arising from and constructed in western societies. During the twentieth century, African political and social activists periodically utilised, and debated the extent to which, originally western political and moral meta-narratives (for example, Christianity, socialism, democracy, neo-liberalism, human rights etc.) provided a meaningful framework for their local activism. Although Africans have appropriated, rethought and reworked such concepts, utilising them in their own interests and in hybrid forms relevant to their specific context, a tension nevertheless often arises between such globalised notions of political change and the particular way in which they are conceived of, articulated and utilised in Africa – a tension which remains under-analysed.

Placing activism at the centre of the historical analysis of recent African history offers both considerable potential, but equally presents considerable methodological and historiographical problems. Local protest movements, particular in rural areas, often went undocumented except for brief reports in local newspapers; recapturing the motives and worldview of activists and separating them from the meta-narratives that were imposed, contemporaneously or retrospectively, on their actions, is in some cases a virtually impossible task. Distinguishing essentially reactive protests on the one hand, from longer-term activist initiatives that become visible to external observers only during periods of protest, is an important but challenging task. This article, in providing an overview of activism in late-colonial and post-colonial Africa, necessarily provides few specific insights in this regard. Rather, it has the more modest aim of providing a meaningful periodisation of activism in the twentieth century and early twenty-first century and, in exploring some of the issues that arise, to provide a stimulus for future research in this area.

Political activism in Africa in the early colonial period

The study of political activism in the twentieth century generally suffered from the imposition of externally constructed and often abstract frameworks onto localised movements, which were then criticised for not failing to reflect these frameworks. Africanist historians of the 1960s, for example, in seeking to explain the absence of united 'primary' resistance to the imposition of colonial rule, assumed shared interests amongst African societies that had in fact no intrinsic cultural commonality and had indeed often been in conflict with each other.[2] African societies, enormously diverse in their size, material development, mode of governance and socio-cultural perspectives, reacted in various ways to the initial imposition of colonial rule and, most immediately, its particular manifestations. Chiefly political systems generally provided an inadequate response to the dislocating effects of colonialism and were, in British colonies at least, incorporated in reconstructed forms into colonial systems of governance. Religious ideas (whether indigenous, Islamic and Christian, or a syncretic combination) often provided the most compelling explanation, not of the moment of colonialism itself, but rather the often traumatic lived experience of colonial society. This was one of many processes in which imposed or imported frameworks of analysis meshed with local moral and societal notions, to political effect. Across central and southern Africa, local 'Ethiopian' churches utilised Biblical texts suggesting imminent transformational liberation to offer a vision of millenarian change more compelling than that offered by orthodox mission churches. Periodic outbursts of religiously informed activism gave expression to popular demands for transformative change. For example, John Chilembwe's revolt against colonial rule in Nyasaland (today's Malawi) utilised such ideas to mobilise an armed revolt against European settlers.[34] Numerous other examples—amongst them, the Watch Tower church in Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia, the prophet Simon Kimbangu in the Belgian Congo, the Aladura church in Nigeria or Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba

in French West Africa—were suppressed by colonial authorities, which detained their leaders.[5] Whilst few of these churches had any overt political content, colonial officials and social scientists alike suspected they might contain the seeds of nationalism, a form of politics by other means.

Meanwhile, more educated and economically successful Africans articulated a more moderate form of political activism with which they negotiated a position for themselves in inter-war Africa.[6] Educated and wealthier Africans, who sought to establish themselves as an aspirant indigenous bourgeoisie, were however sometimes frustrated in these efforts by the petty racism of colonialism. Harry Thuku, who in 1921 founded the Kikuyu Association, later the East African Association, aimed during this period to assert indigenous economic rights against settler demands for land and for lower African wages. Thuku, arrested in 1922 for militant anti-colonial activities, was by the 1940s a moderate constitutionalist who, in the 1950s, sided with the British against the 'Mau Mau' rebellion.[7]

Elsewhere, native associations sought explicitly to represent elite African interests. To give one example, in the Belgian Congo in 1944, *évolués* petitioned the Belgian colonial Governor General to consider their interests as a 'kind of native bourgeoisie... [deserving] ... a particular protection from the government, sheltering them from certain masses or treatment which may apply to an ignorant or backward mass'.[8] As their inability to negotiate such reforms became increasingly evident, middle-class Africans recognised the need to make common cause with the wider indigenous population in broader nationalist coalitions unifying diverse interests—but this did not mean that the divisions, socio-economic and cultural, that existed within African societies were any less significant.

Activism and Nationalism

The high point of popular activism in recent African history is that associated with the anti-colonial movements of the period from 1945 to c. 1965, which played a significant role in ending European colonisation and bringing to power nationalist governments in newly independent states. Historians of Africa have rightly rejected earlier views of this process as one primarily of European 'decolonisation' and emphasised the agency of African activists: urban protests, rural revolts, industrial action and consumer boycotts were just some of the tactics successfully utilised to express anti-colonial grievances and undoubtedly accelerated the achievement of independence.[9] Nationalist historians, however, proceeded from the faulty assumption that such activism was directly reflective of and subordinate to the particular agenda of nationalist parties and leaders. In fact, this period witnessed a complex interaction between overtly 'nationalist' parties and a diverse set of political or social movements, which supported the general project for 'independence' but invested it with a different meanings and aspirations, social, economic and cultural. Thomas Hodgkin, in 1956, made the point that the very term 'African nationalism "tends to conceal the 'mixed-up' character of African political movements...Most of these various types of organisation ... were not concerned, overtly or primarily, with achieving national independence or stimulating a sense of...nationhood"'.[10] Nationalist leaders skilfully drew on popular grievances (economic, but also cultural) and sought to associate their alleviation with the achievement of national independence. In so doing, they consciously replicated the experiences and practices of non-African nationalists who successfully linked local socio-economic and cultural concerns and protests to their demand for national self-determination. Mahatma Gandhi provided an inspiration to many African nationalists, but so too did European pioneers such as Giuseppe Mazzini. Such initiatives sought but commonly failed to mask their own regional or sub-national particularities, and were themselves frequently challenged by competing sub-nationalisms within the territories to which they laid claim.[11]

Labour unions were amongst the most significant activist institutions upon which nationalists drew. Despite their small membership (reflecting limited industrialisation), trade unions proved in the late-colonial period to be particularly disruptive to colonial economies dependent on the production, transportation and export of minerals and other raw goods. Workers' use of strike action to extract higher wages and improved conditions led nationalist politicians to seek to utilise industrial unrest to bring about their political demands. This however brought political parties into conflict with union leaders, many of whom were sceptical that a linear focus on the achievement of self-government was the best way of addressing their members' material grievances.

Labour activism was initially decidedly informal and often illegal. The wartime period witnessed significant unrest, arising from the rising cost of living, amongst African workers who were generally legally barred from forming trade unions. In 1945 a general strike that paralysed Nigeria was followed in quick succession by strike action in the mines and transport services of various colonies. In the late 1940s, French and British colonial officials accepted the need for legal trade unions, but sought to ensure they would be respectable and 'non-political'. The evident effectiveness of labour unrest highlighted its potential for providing support for broader anti-colonial movements. There was however strong resistance by many union leaders to fully fledged alliances with nationalist organisations. In 1953 for example, the Northern Rhodesian African Mineworkers' Union refused to endorse a two-day protest by the African National Congress.[12] The resultant tension and mutual suspicion raised questions regarding the dual identities of Africans as members of a new organised working-class, and as potential subjects of independent nations.[13] Meanwhile, individual unionists emerged as prominent nationalist leaders and, subsequently, political leaders of soon-to-be independent states.[14] Nationalist alliances with labour movements increasingly focussed not

on industrial action to win political change, but on the prevention of strikes to smooth the path to independence. Now in the position of managing fledgling states with highly peripheral capitalist economies, they discouraged industrial action in the interests of 'national development'.

Meanwhile, what Low and Lonsdale termed the "second colonial occupation" led to an increased interventionism by colonial states in the lives of their subjects.[15] Attempts to boost agricultural development prompted resistance, for example in Tanganyika, by local African improvement associations and cooperative farming bodies, often in opposition to chiefly authorities.[16] Efforts made by colonial authorities to 'improve' African agriculture were perceived by Africans as unwarranted interference in their ways of living, prompting protests and more passive forms of resistance.[17] Such protests mobilised rural support for nationalist movements, despite the general support amongst many nationalists for precisely this type of agricultural modernisation scheme, something that would lead to conflict after the achievement of independence.

Similar tensions existed between male-dominated nationalist bodies and women's organisations, which often played a vital role in mass support and mobilisation. In Nigeria for example, women protestors challenged the requisition of their produce during World War Two; subsequently, the Abekouta Women's Union (AWU), led by Fummilayo Anikulapo-Kuti, used the slogan "no taxation without representation" in protests against chiefs who collected taxes on behalf of the colonial state.[18] Kuti and others were jailed for organising protests of 10,000 women in 1947. The AWU evolved into the Nigerian Women's Union and many of its members went on to join emergent nationalist parties such as the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). However, despite seeking to mobilise the

support of such women, Nigeria's nationalist parties refused to adopt women as candidates in elections; in partial contrast, the Ghanaian Convention People's Party reserved 10% of its parliamentary seats for women.[19] The Women's Section of the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), led by Bibi Titi Mohammed, was composed of semi-literate married middle-aged Muslim women, who played a vital agitational and organisational role in turning TANU into a mass party.[20] In so doing, they sought to widen the political equality that TANU demanded to include gender equality. In general however, women did not attain nationalist leadership positions, except in women's leagues or unions.

Much of the richness, heterogeneity and ambiguity of anti-colonial activism was neglected or disregarded by early historians of African nationalism, who regarded such diverse local expressions of discontent as relevant only insofar as they contributed to the transition to independent rule. Idealistic observers tended to uncritically confirm nationalist leaders' assertions that African societies were essentially classless or homogeneous and that 'sectional' differences, supposedly the result of unwelcome western or capitalist influences, would (and should) be overcome by state-led developmentalism and modernisation. Realist observers regarded the more radical demands of activists as 'unrealistic expectations' that would, in the natural course of events, be tempered or suppressed by post-colonial states. More germane to historical analysis is the fact that such demands, which had fuelled the participation of activists in nationalist struggles, continued to inform the relation between popular activism and nationalist parties after the transition to independence.

Activism after Independence

The initial post-colonial period, from the early 1960s until around the mid-to-late 1970s, saw the emergence of a post-independence state dominated in most cases by a centralised ruling

party, which tended to view the autonomous social movements which had played an important role in mobilising anti-colonial discontent as a threat to or distraction from the central project of national-developmentalism. In this phase, activist articulation of "sectional" grievances or aspirations was negatively counterposed by nationalist rulers to the monopoly they claimed over the articulation of "national" interests. The leaders of newly independent African states continued to utilise the rhetoric of opposition activism, sometimes directed against links between foreign 'neo-colonialism' and internal critics who were dubbed an 'enemy within'. Developmental self-initiative was stifled by state control over rural initiatives such as cooperatives. Independent worker and peasant unions were similarly repressed and/or incorporated into party-state structures, undermining their capacity for representation. Organisational incorporation did not, however, equate to the effective incorporation of workers or peasants themselves.[21] Activists retained a diversity of interpretations of "liberation", "freedom" or "independence", and periodically sought to operationalise their ideas in ways that brought them into conflict with post-colonial states.

Generally, however, this was a period in which ruling parties were able to restrict or suppress autonomous expressions of activism, using the repressive structures of the states they had inherited from colonial regimes. Economic growth did not generally lead to sustainable development, but was initially sufficient to provide Africa's new independent rulers with significant patrimonial capacity, with which they could buy off some of their most vocal and organised critics. Although post-colonial governments expressed rhetorical commitments both to gender equality and to overcoming the poverty of women, they generally perpetuated maternal and feminine stereotypes, suppressing independent women's organisations in favour of official Women's Leagues of ruling parties. Few women MPs were elected, and female ministerial representation was generally limited to tokenistic areas such as Social Welfare.

For example, shortly after Tanganyikan independence in 1963, President Nyerere banned all independent women's organisations, establishing a single national women's organisation, *Umoja wa Wanawake wa Tanganyika* (UWT). Although Bibi Titi Mohammed initially led the UWT, she was marginalised in favour of younger, more educated women with the capacity to manage administrative and financial organisation, something that happened to many grassroots local leaders after independence. Whereas the Women's Section had sought to mobilise women politically, the UWT emphasised the technical improvement of women's lives from above, without their participation.[22] In Tanganikya as elsewhere, the vast majority of women lacked effective political representation; for many, the achievement of independence made little difference in their lives.

Although the established churches did not initially criticise the authoritarian actions of newly independent states, more independent churches continued to offer a biblically-informed critique of the political system. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Kitawala church expressed dissatisfaction with the slow pace of economic and social change just two years after independence, utilising a combination of radical nationalism and millenarian discourse: 'Before independence we dreamed that it would bring us masses of marvellous things. All of that was to descend from the sky…Deliverance and Salvation…But here it is, more than two years we have been waiting, and nothing has come. On the contrary our life is more difficult, we are more poor than before'.[23] The Kitawala movement led an uprising that briefly seized Kisangani in 1964; Kitawala youth gangs massacred intellectuals before the movement was itself violently suppressed.

As in other authoritarian systems, newly independent African states sought to shore up their fragile hegemony via the curtailment of non-state associational activity. Refusal to participate

in state-initiated initiatives was sufficient to attract hostility or even repression from the authorities. The violent suppression of Watch Tower or Jehovah's Witness churches in Malawi and Zambia was justified on the basis that their members refused to accept the membership cards of ruling parties, to salute the national flag or sing the national anthem. It can be argued more generally that Christian (and, in some areas, Islamic) thinking was the most significant influence on activist discourse through much of this period, as well as shaping the ways in which the majority of Africans constructed their political and moral perspectives. Certainly, mainstream African churches successfully resisted the suppression of their activities, in part because some of their number were, unlike most local civic associations, constituent parts of global church institutions, the reach and influence of which eclipsed that of African nation-states. In this respect as in others, what were once external influences on African practices were in such instances powerful global linkages that could be utilised by African activists to powerful effect.

More generally however, social movements were forcibly incorporated into state and ruling party structures after independence. This reflected the widespread nationalist position that the supposed lack of class differentiation within African societies made such independent associational life either unnecessary, or a luxury that developing countries could not afford.[24] Thus, former trade union leader and Guinean president Sekou Touré insisted there was no 'plurality' of interests in African society. Internal dissent, when it did occur, could therefore be blamed on foreign or neo-colonial influence.[25]

African leaders also argued that the developmental concerns of the rural poor had to come before those of relatively privileged urban workers. Post-colonial leaders often replicated colonial anxiety regarding the relatively small number of organised urban workers; they had

witnessed the disruption that industrial action could have on a colonial economy dependent on a few strategic industries. New African states, and the political parties that controlled them, positioned themselves as the sole agency responsible for the redistribution of wealth. Therefore, the autonomy of labour movements was rapidly eroded after Independence. Some nationalist regimes practised versions of corporatism, presenting the incorporation by states of labour movements as a progressive step that would enable the representation of workers' grievances within the political system. This was symbolically represented by the appointment of labour leaders into government: in French West Africa, eight of the nine new Ministers of Labour were former trade unionists. In Tanganikya, the National Union of Tanganyika (NUTA) was established as the sole legal representative of workers, with independent unions and all strikes being banned. In countries with relatively powerful and well-organised labour movements, such as Zambia and Nigeria, there was significant resistance at such incorporation; as my own research indicates, the structures of trade unions were successfully transformed into sections of the ruling party, but this did not prevent local activists from organising unofficial forms of industrial action, as they sought to realise what they regarded as the rewards of the independence for which they had fought.[26] In many other countries, however, this incorporation was largely successful, and there was a substantial downturn in industrial action.

Newly independent states inherited the developmental framework of late colonialism, but were as unsure as their predecessors how best to achieve growth. Rural development schemes were developed and promoted by the new states, but many were grandiose initiatives conceived by urban civil servants and western development advisors with no participation from the peoples affected. Having excluded local chiefs (seen as complicit in colonial government) from rural decision-making, no alternative form of effective local government

was established—some new states appointed a reinvented form of District Officer, accountable to the President, who presided over his rural area with a level of unaccountable authority akin to his colonial predecessor.

Marketing Boards provided some support to small farmers, but also monopolised the distribution and sale of particular crops at controlled prices.[27] In many countries, the price paid to farmers for their produce was tightly controlled, as new states sought to generate income for themselves or to provide cheap subsidised food for growing urban populations. Moore and Vaughan, in describing Zambia, summarise a more general situation across the continent: 'By the 1970s, government interventions ..., which had previously been justified as encouraging 'grass roots' political participation as well as raising rural incomes, looked more like strategies for the containment and control of peasant political activity'.[28] Some farmers rebelled against such controls by smuggling their produce abroad, to sell at market prices elsewhere.

Many leftist regimes sought to establish some form of collective or state farm structure: ostensibly designed to promote a degree of rural equality and improve access to services, this tended to be disastrous and led to abuses of human rights. James Scott depicts the disastrous impact of *Ujamaa* policies in late-1970s Tanzania, as state officials imposed collective villagization informed by top-down modernisation models of development with as much authoritarianism as in the colonial era.[29] In southern Africa meanwhile, nationalist movements that in the same period utilised guerrilla-based forms of resistance to settler colonial regimes, stressed their symbiotic relationship with rural Africans. Sympathetic observers saw these as popular movements which depended on their ability to move amongst the civilian population 'like fish in water'.[30] Later analysts have however stressed the extent

to which such support rested on the use of terror by guerrilla movements against rural populations, and the extent to which such repressive methods of national liberation (arguably necessitated by the violence of settler regimes themselves) laid the ground for authoritarian post-colonial regimes in Zimbabwe, Namibia and Angola.[31] Bowen's work on Mozambique equally demonstrates how peasants, despite playing an important role in the struggle against Portuguese colonialism in the early 1970s, were later treated in ways that completely undermined their support for the nationalist-movement-turned-ruling-party, Frelimo, whose '...agricultural strategy completely negated what independence meant to the peasantry'.[32]

Peasants were not passive in the face of such problems, but their resistance was often individualised and "hidden". Peasants used the "weapons of the weak", refusing to obey instructions supposedly designed to improve their agricultural practice, as they had done under colonialism. They deserted collective farms and returned to their home areas.[33] Through such means, many rural communities avoided the imposition of agricultural and economic policies which they opposed; African states generally lacked sufficient authoritarian capacity to impose their developmental will on uncooperative populations.

The mid-1970s downturn and after

The most important turning point in post-colonial history, namely the economic downturn of the mid-1970s, had a profound effect on activism in Africa. Most African countries, dependent on increasingly expensive oil imports and receiving much lower income for the primary commodities on which their economies depended, experienced recession. Short-term borrowing became a long-term debt burden, which led to the imposition by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank of structural adjustment programmes from the late 1970s and more particularly in the 1980s. With this reduction of sovereignty, state hegemony was

severely weakened and/or exposed, and the capacity of African rulers to buy off opposition reduced or destroyed. Simultaneously however, the partial retreat of the state amidst the external imposition of economic liberalisation opened up limited space for new activist structures, many of which avoided overtly political issues and sought instead local solutions to growing economic and social problems. The 3rd World Conference on Women, held in Nairobi in 1985, brought African activists together with many western feminists. New peasant associations similarly made links with international NGOs which constructed Africa's problems in apolitical ways, an early symptom of an interaction between African and global 'civil society' that would manifest itself more fully from the 1990s onwards (see below). Some one-party states were willing to tolerate a degree of popular participation, in the hope that it might alleviate social problems they were unable to address.

The removal of consumer subsidies led to a substantial rise in the cost of living of the urban population in the early and mid 1980s. This increased popular discontent with the failure of the post-colonial state to address the expectations that had been raised in the transition to independence. However, avenues for the expression of legitimate public discontent were limited: as we have seen, most independent civil society organisations and social movements had either been suppressed or incorporated into state structures. Although some nationalist parties had initially been vibrant organisations throughout many parts of their countries, local party structures atrophied as a result of their loss of patrimonial capacity, curtailing this avenue for the expression of discontent. In these circumstances, some incorporated civil society leaders expressed limited criticism of specific government policies or leaders, whilst expressing their overall loyalty to the one-party state.

The imposition by African states of direct attacks on living standards of the urban poor led to the 'food riots' of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Post-colonial states, like their colonial

predecessors, had always feared the disorder of the urban poor and unemployed; unlike their colonial predecessors, they generally failed to prevent considerable rural-urban migration, and resorted instead to buying off dissent by the subsidisation of consumer food prices. The economic downturn made this unsustainable, with explosive results. The 1977 revolt in Egypt against the government's decision to raise food and petrol prices under the auspices of the IMF was the first of a wave of anti-structural adjustment protests that represented a popular rejection of attempts by both national governments and the international financial institutions (IFIs) to make the urban poor pay the price of a crisis entirely outside their control. In Tunisia and Zambia, for example, the abolition of food subsidies in 1983 and 1986 respectively led to the doubling of the cost of staple goods and to substantial riots. Zghal illustrates how the Tunisian riots were organised not by incorporated unions or other structures which had been incorporated into the corporatist state, but locally by young women and the unemployed. In both countries, these protests forced their respective presidents to re-establish food subsidies, angering donors but assuaging public opinion. Supposedly hegemonic ruling parties had their weaknesses revealed both by their inability to control unrest, and by their reversal of policy.[34] Such one-off protests by urban masses had the potential to feed into more sustained forms of activism, but also raised the spectre of disorder that could be used by authoritarian states as an excuse for more sustained repression of activist networks.

Although ruling parties often sought to retain state controls over the economy, the dependency on international donors meant that this could not be sustained. Structural adjustment (and later forms of economic liberalisation), whilst certainly unpopular, had an unintentionally positive impact for social movement activists. By exposing the inability of most regimes to prevent popular unrest, and in particular demonstrating the potential for such unrest to overturn unpopular policies, it encouraged dissidents of various kinds to more

openly criticise the one-party states.

Towards the later 1980s, such 'spontaneous' protests, directed predominantly against neo-liberal economic reforms and austerity measures, contained elements of a critique of regime legitimacy and deployed notions of social justice. Such movements took on aspects of the character of a political opposition, challenging policies and changing the prevailing political configuration. There was however a lack of a coherent unifying political discourse or narrative available to African activists that could generalise specific struggles into a more coherent political movement. They were generally influenced by an unpredictable combination of ideological and religious moral ideas (for example, Catholic social teaching), filtered through and combined with more localised notions of (in)justice.

Activism and the dual transition in the early 1990s

The wave of pro-democracy movements which swept across Africa in the early 1990s is often portrayed as a singular and unexpected event with little connection to what had gone before. By 1992, many African governments had been forced to introduce reforms, and in 1993, 14 countries held democratic elections. In a four-year period from the start of the protests in 1990, a total of 35 regimes were swept away by protest movements and strikes, and in elections that were often held for the first time in a generation. Eastern Europe's anti-communist revolutions had a considerable impact on the timing of Africa's pro-democracy movements, but this was a spark that lit an already smouldering bonfire of popular social and economic discontent.

The transition to multi-party democracy in so many countries was not simply an 'elite transition': mass activism and the mobilisation of social movements, particularly trade unions

and church bodies, was often the difference between a successful and a frustrated transition to democracy. Coinciding as it did with the emergence of a unipolar US-dominated world, political liberalisation was coupled with market-based economic liberalisation as the singular solution to the problems of Africa. The fact that the eventual outcome of these movements was the wholesale implementation of economic liberalisation programmes by most of the new democratic governments should not however deflect attention from the material basis of many pro-democracy campaigns, but rather the perennial difficulty of converting activism into sustained political change

The pro-democracy movement started in Bénin in 1989. Students demonstrated against the government in January, demanding overdue grants and guarantees of state employment after graduation. The government, crippled by financial scandal, capital flight and falling tax revenue, responded (as it always had) by repression. The movement grew during the year to incorporate trade unions and the urban poor. Attempting to assuage some critics, President Mathieu Kérékou declared that his People's Revolutionary Party of Bénin (PRPB) had rejected "Marxism-Leninism" and agreed that multi-party elections could be held. In a pattern followed by other countries, Kérékou established a national reconciliation conference involving the opposition, trade unions, students and religious associations. Trade unionists left the state-controlled National Federation of Workers' Unions of Benin (UNSTB). By the end of 1989 Benin's capital Cotonou was convulsed by mass demonstrations. When Kérékou attempted to reconcile with demonstrators he was jeered and threatened, and forced to flee. In February 1990 the National Conference of Active Forces declared itself sovereign, dissolving the national assembly.

In similar events across the continent, mass demonstrations and general strikes forced the pace of democratic change. A wide variety of popular forces challenged regimes in Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, Swaziland, Zaire and Zambia. Trade unions 'sought not simply to protect the work-place interests of their members but ... endeavoured to bring about a restructuring of the political system'.[35] Christian church leaders played an important role, for example in Kenya and Malawi. In a situation where many groups had lost their capacity for autonomous expression, churches linked to international denominations were able to draw on global support and on widespread acceptance of the legitimacy of biblical teaching to resist such pressures. These pro-democracy movements were in many respects similar to the nationalist movements that had achieved independence from the colonial powers. They came together quickly from a range of social forces, sought unity around a single common goal and in many cases, rapidly evolved from single-issue movements into opposition political parties. Within such multi-party movements, for example in Zambia, trade unionists who had fought against structural adjustment found common cause with business people who hoped multi-partyism would lead to further economic liberalisation. Social and economic problems could all be blamed on the incumbent ruling party, the removal of which would thereby enable those problems to be overcome. As with nationalist movements, this temporary unity undoubtedly smoothed the path to new multi-party democracies—and as with nationalism, it created unforeseen difficulties regarding the direction of these states after their achievement.

The role of activism, both in this transitional period and in the constrained democracies that resulted, was evidently ambiguous. The substantial decline in state capacity and the redirection of external funding to non-governmental organisations strengthened some existing

social movements with credible grassroots linkages, but simultaneously led to a proliferation of new NGOs, many owing their existence solely to the availability of donor funding and therefore accountable externally, rather than to those they claimed to speak for or represent. 'Civil society' was freed to act by political liberalisation, but simultaneously hampered in so doing by the deleterious effects of economic liberalisation.

Understanding activism since the 1990s

This dual transition to political and economic liberalisation—which was, it must be noted, incomplete or indeed reversed in a number of countries—had contradictory effects on African activism. In many places it opened up considerable space for societal activism: new constitutions provided legal freedoms of speech and assembly, even whilst these were sometimes disregarded by new governments brought to power by pro-democracy movements. New independent newspapers and radio stations provided forums for the expression of dissent. At the same time, the demands that activists could place on the state were reshaped by the sharp turn towards neo-liberalism and the consequent reduced role of the state in economic and social spheres. Partly as a consequence, civil society turned away from making demands and towards service provision, filling the gaps left behind by the retreat and decay of the state. They were encouraged and to some extent aided in this by western donors and international NGOs, which had discovered the merits of what was now termed 'civil society' in Eastern Europe and were keen to promote its role in Africa. The sudden availability of donor funding, however, frequently distorted the development of indigenous civil society, leading to the orientation of its activities towards donor priorities. At its most extreme, this led to the establishment of what became known as 'briefcase NGOs', created solely to access donor funding but with no meaningful grassroots support.

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In the 1990s and 2000s, popular struggles that erupted in the context of the dual transition to political and economic liberalisation often manifested themselves as liberal movements for "good governance" and "human rights". Activists seeking to alleviate the effects of economic liberalization were encouraged by their western funders to seek to address their grievances via more formal political or constitutional reform, rather than a deepening of democratic culture and practice that encompasses popular scrutiny and (ultimately) control of the socio-economic situation. In certain circumstances, western powers and the IFIs regarded limited forms of social protest as a way to undermine governments that had failed to successfully implement programmes of liberal reform. This does not mean that all such protest movements were manipulated by western powers, but critical analysis is required of the influences upon movements engaged in processes of political change.

In an era of economic liberalisation, as large numbers of formal sector workers were retrenched, the relationship between labour organisations with shrinking memberships and social movements seeking to represent the wider urban poor, including many former union members, became an increasingly important one in explaining the changing forms of activism. In some southern Africa countries, former union activists took their organisational skills with them into campaigns for the rights of retrenched workers, against the environmental impact of industry, or into new political campaigns and parties. Changing class dynamics, arising in part from the devastating impact of neo-liberalism on organised labour movements across much of the continent, have altered the nature of activism. Traditional venues of struggle—the workplace, the land, etc.—have been supplemented by new spaces in which power is contested and in which new strategies and modes of struggle manifest themselves. It has long been recognised that peasant resistance may be 'hidden' or indirect, based on escape or non-compliance rather than more overt forms of struggle, but the

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same may also apply to struggles by other elements of African society. Standardised models of industrial action have often been undermined in Africa by the illegality of strike action and the suppression of public assembly: in Marikana in August 2012, 34 members of the supposedly powerful South African labour movement were massacred by the police force of a state governed by a political party led by former trade unionists and allied to the country's dominant labour congress.[36] In such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the material grievances of activists are commonly framed not by any overtly ideological analysis, but rather ideas of injustice best understood as a form of 'moral economy', sometimes shaped by religious teaching.

Debates about morality within African society have themselves become an important focus for activism. The proliferation of civil society and the relative space afforded by democracy, coupled with globalised interactions with western liberal ideas, have generated new campaign movements that challenge established social values. For example, campaigns against female circumcision in east Africa, once the preserve of western Christian male-dominated organisations, are now led by educated and 'westernised' African women, who seek to liberate their rural sisters from a cultural practice that, for many of the latter, remains an essential rite of passage to adulthood. Struggles over sexual freedom have become an important and violently contested new terrain of struggle, as a new cultural politics pervades the supposedly private space of sexuality. New homosexual rights movements have taken advantage of HIV/AIDS to openly discuss private sexual practices, whilst simultaneously articulating a rights-based discourse for the legitimacy of a gay lifestyle.[37] The degree of hostility and resistance to such ideas reminds us that a great deal of African activism is fuelled by ideas that do not sit easily with liberal notions of progress. Similarly, frustrated

aspirations for territory-wide change can slip into sectional or ethnically articulated grievances.

Nevertheless, struggles over material circumstances remain central to the creation and recreation of social movements on the continent, which nevertheless articulate their discontent in culturally specific terms. Of recent significance, the wave of protests against the rise in food prices in 2011 demonstrated once again the creative capacity of local activists to generate new and effective urban movements, always building on their historical antecedents and operating in particular local circumstances. The Arab Spring has provided considerable inspiration to many activists south of the Sahara; it should be recalled however that, thanks to the efforts of activists of an earlier generation, most of the continent is at least formally democratic, so the particular relationship between socio-economic grievances and political change is generally different than in the north of the continent.

Conclusion: Activism and extraversion in a globalised Africa

In each of the periods discussed in this paper, African activists, far more than their western counterparts (which provide the basis for much theoretical and conceptual work on activism), have been influenced by their continent's long history of globalisation: a history controlled largely by western powers, but in which African agency was always important. Anti-colonial activism necessitated local protests, colony-wide organisation and lobbying in the metropole itself. Today, challenging human rights abuses, campaigning for debt relief or stopping environmental damage similarly requires action at both local and global levels. Throughout this history, activists have drawn on powerful meta-narratives of progressive change, for example Christian notions of deliverance, national independence, varieties of socialism and Pan-Africanism (the latter an ideology that initially developed outside Africa), liberal

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democracy and Islamic fundamentalism. Africans utilised new political discourses enabled by these interactions, but researchers have generally failed to analyse whether and to what extent such *discourses* represent the adoption of the political *ideas* associated with them in the west. In practice, such 'universalist' political discourses have interacted with localised discourses that may reflect more 'authentic' Africanist thinking. Sometimes competing with global political languages, sometimes combined with them in hybrid forms, African political discourse has been characterised by a perpetual and arguably inherent tension reflecting a 'universal' desire to be 'modern', 'developed' or 'free', whilst simultaneously insisting that such ideas flow from African culture, society or history, commonly essentialised as inherently communal, collective, non-materialistic and in more specific forms, for example in the South African notion of '*Ubuntu*'.

It should however be evident that there is no activism that is authentically "of the people". Research on activism must always have regard to tensions and conflicts, not only between particular movements, but also within them. Any study of a particular movement should analyse the relationship between a series of (usually unequal) actors: its leaders and officials; its paid employees (where relevant); those it seeks to directly represent and benefit; and those who are affected, directly or indirectly, by its activities. Unequal power relations – between the more and less educated, women and men, different ethnic groups, and between a dozen other potential divisions, have the potential to shape social movement discourse or activity.[38] Activist movements are not best understood as authentic and unproblematic movements of the people, easily contrasted to the powerful and exploitative in society. They are rather an expression of the contradictions and hierarchies of the society in which they operate, whose debates and conflicts express inequalities of resources and influence, education and influence, gender and ethnicity, amongst many others. This does not make them "inauthentic"

movements—rather, it makes them real articulations of political difference in societies marked by inequality and social conflict. The presumption of researchers should be to assume the existence of such tensions, hierarchies and inequalities, the better to enable analysis of the same.[39]

The anti-globalisation movement of the 2000s provided one way of overcoming African social movements' marginalisation and dependency on western funding. This movement of movements suggested that, in an era of globalised neo-liberal capitalism and technological connectivity, a global counter-hegemonic movement of movements could develop in which existing inequalities and hierarchies between western and non-western movements might be overcome. Research on African participation in the anti-globalisation movement however suggests that its particular *modus operandi* of decentralized and apparently egalitarian decision-making unwittingly reflects and reproduces some aspects of the inequalities and injustices of the globalized economy against which it positions itself.[40] Most significantly, the African nation-state, notwithstanding its demonstrable weaknesses, remains the most relevant focus of African activism.

The recent (since approximately 2005) return to economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa, while in most cases only marginally improving living standards, has changed the terrain of social movement activism in some parts of the continent. Twenty years of neo-liberal hegemony and constant economic crisis had left subaltern social forces disarmed, arguing only over the specific circumstances of decline. Mineral booms in some countries, driven largely by Chinese demand, have combined in certain circumstances with the granting of debt relief to free political activists from the chains of conditionality and begin to consider anew paths to development and redistribution of highly skewed wealth distribution. The success of

China's developmental path, and the influence of Latin American populism, provide instructive examples that may help African activists escape the hegemony of western models of both economic development and political activism. However, the diverse circumstances and history of African societies warns us against any straightforward conversion of either political ideas or outcomes: it is noteworthy that attempts to expand the discourses of the Arab Spring to sub-Saharan Africa in, for example, Uganda have been of only limited success. It may also be noted that the contemporary dynamics of anti-cuts activism in southern and eastern Europe, in which Greek or Spanish protestors confront the imposition of cuts by weak national governments imposed by the international financial institutions, closely resemble those of African anti-debt protestors of the 1980s and 1990s, who refused to accept the declared impotence of their elected national governments in the face of unaccountable global markets and institutions.[41]

This article has sought to summarise the complex experience of African activism over more than half-a-century. In so doing, it is itself unavoidably guilty not only of sweeping generalisation, but also imposing broad narratives of "struggle" onto movements with diverse aims, organisational forms, modes and methods of activism. Progressive western analysts of African political history have tended over the last fifty years to seek to identify particular social forces or movements that can form the basis of overarching, self-conscious projects of radical political transformation, usually of a preconceived kind. Africans have meanwhile gone about the difficult and often dangerous business of seeking to improve the particular circumstances of sections of their society, activities which at times coalesced into broader movements for social change that carried within them the potential for a radical transformation of society. Whilst western analysts and observers of Africa have commonly searched in vain for singular counter-hegemonic force that might address the continent's

problems, researchers are encouraged to focus on the recent history of the thousands of

ideologically messy and frequently contradictory movements that have been and remain

Africa's true story of activism.

Notes

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[2] For example, A.B. Davidson, "African Resistance and Rebellion Against the Imposition of Colonial Rule", in Terence O. Ranger (ed.), *Emerging Themes of African History* (London: Heinemann, 1968): 177-188

[3] George Shepperson, *Independent African: John Chilembwe and the Origins, Setting and Significance of the Native Rising of 1915* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1987).

[4] Robert I. Rotberg, *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa: the making of Malawi and Zambia, 1873-1964*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966): 67-72.

[5] On Aladura, see J.D.Y. Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

[6] Basil Davidson, "Useless Visionaries, Detestable Clerks", in *Let Freedom Come: Africa in Modern History* (1978): 165-185.

[7] John Lonsdale, 'Harry Thuku', *Oxford Dictionary of National Bibliography* (online access, 15 February 2013).

[8] Reprinted in *Dettes de Guerre* (Elisabethville, 1945):128-9; quoted in Crawford Young, "Zaire: The Shattered Illusion of the Integral State", in J.D. Le Sueur (ed.), *The Decolonization Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003): 414-427.

[9] See for example, John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[10] Thomas Hodgkin, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa* (London: Muller, 1956): 25.

[11] For Gold Coast/Ghana, see Jean M Allman, *Quills of the Porcupine.* For subsequent studies following Allman's groundbreaking approach, see Baz Lecocq, Lecocq, B., *Disputed Desert: Decolonisation, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Northern Mali* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); and Miles Larmer, *Rethinking African Politics: A History of Opposition in Zambia* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

[12] Henry S. Meebelo, *African Proletarians and Colonial Capitalism* (Lusaka: Kenneth Kaunda Foundation, 1986): 327.

[13] Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 408-452.

[14] For example Sekou Touré, the first president of independent Guinea: see Elizabeth Schmidt, 'Top Down or Bottom Up? Nationalist Mobilization Reconsidered, with Special Reference to Guinea (French West Africa)', *The American Historical Review*, 110, No. 5 (2005): 975-1014.

[15] D.A. Low and J.M. Lonsdale, "Introduction: Towards the New Order, 1945-1963" in D.A. Low and Alison Smith (eds.), *History of East Africa Vol. 3* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976): 1-63.

[16] Quoted in John Iliffe, *Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994):502.

[17] Henrietta Moore and Megan Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890-1990* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994): 132-6.

[18] Ifi Amadiume, *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture* (London: Zed Books, 1997): 168-9.

[19] Ibid: 170-173.

[20] Susan Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan nationalism* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997).

[21] Miles Larmer, *Mineworkers in Zambia: Labour and Political Change in Post-Colonial Africa* (London: IB Tauris, 2007).

[22] Geiger, *TANU Women*: 165-7.

[23] Quoted in Adrian Hastings, *History of African Christianity, 1950–1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979): 150.

[24] For example, Julius Nyerere's '*Ujamaa*' socialism: see Julius Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1968).

[25] For an example of these ideas, see Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite* (London: PANAF, 1985).

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[27] Robert H. Bates, *Rural Responses to Industrialization: a Study of Village Zambia* Yale University Press (New Haven CN, 1976).

[28] Moore and Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees*: 138.

[29] James C. Scott, 'Compulsory Villagization in Tanzania: Aesthetics and Miniaturization' in *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998):223-261.

[30] For Zimbabwe, see T.O. Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe: A Comparative Study* (Oxford: James Currey, 1985).

[31] For the former point, see Norma Kriger, Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); for the latter, see Henning Melber (ed.), *Limits to*

Liberation in Southern Africa: The Unfinished Business of Democratic Consolidation (Johannesburg: Human Sciences Research Council, 2003).

[32] Merle L. Bowen, *The State Against the Peasantry: Rural Struggles in Colonial and Postcolonial Mozambique* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2000): 2.

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[35] John.A. Wiseman, *The New Struggle for Democracy in Africa* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996): 49.

[36] Peter Alexander, "Voices from Marikana", *Amandla Magazine*: http://www.amandlapublishers.co.za/amandla-magazine/current-issue/1585-voices-from-marikana (accessed 3 December 2012).

[37] See for example, Patrick Awondo, "The Politicisation of Sexuality and Rise of Homosexual Movements in post-colonial Cameroon', *Review of African Political Economy*, 37, no. 125 (2010): 315-328.

[38] For an exemplary study of such inequalities and power relationships, see Nadine Beckmann and Janet Bujra. "The 'Politics of the Queue': The Politicization of People Living with HIV/AIDS in Tanzania", *Development and Change*, 14, no. 6 (2010): 1041-1064.

[39] See for example, Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle, 'The Extraversion of Protest: conditions, history and use of the 'international' in Africa', *Review of African Political Economy* 37, no. 125 (2010): 263-280.

[40] Miles Larmer, Leo Zeilig and Peter Dwyer, "Southern African Social Movements at the 2007 Nairobi World Social Forum", *Global Networks*, 9, no. 1 (2009), pp. 41-62; *Marie-*

Emmanuelle Pommerolle and Johanna Siméant, "African Voices and Activists at the WSF in Nairobi: The Uncertain Ways of Transnational African Activism" in Jackie Smith, Ellen Reese, Scott Byrd and Elizabeth Smythe (eds.), *Handbook on World Social Forum Activism* (Herndon, VA: Paradigm, 2012).

[41] I am grateful to Graham Harrison, whose depiction of a 'thirty-year archive' of African experiences of structural adjustment and resistance to it, helped frame this argument. Harrison, inaugural lecture: '(African) Politics', University of Sheffield, 7 November 2012.