

AFRICA: CRISIS AND CHANGE

Introducing the Issues

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his special issue of *Dissent* devotes itself entirely to Africa today. In the past three years the world has altered fundamentally, and virtually everywhere across Africa there is a dialectic of crisis and change at work. Old regimes and ideas are being contested, new political voices are being heard, novel social and economic realities are in the making. Unhappily, the immediate prospects don't seem particularly bright; indeed, some are potentially devastating. A watchword among African intellectuals and informed observers nowadays is "Afro-pessimism."

The Western press pays only modest attention to African developments (apart, of course, from the great drama of South Africa). However, a process is under way that draws on many ingredients at a time of rapid global transformation. Here is a preliminary list:

- the oppressive political and shallow developmental legacies of European imperialism;
- the cultural complexities of African societies;
- blistering poverty, hunger and disease (now including a calamitous AIDS epidemic);
- the repressive, corrupt, and inefficient governance of African states by their own elites after independence;
- a crisis of political legitimacy, due to the above factors;
- changes in the world economy and obdurate—often brutal—demands made of Africans by Western financial powers such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank;
- the prospect that South Africa may be finally rid of its heinous apartheid system, yet still faces an uncertain, possibly tumultuous future;
- and, of course, the end of the cold war, the

collapse of the "second world," and the apparent failure of third worldism.

This list only hints at the complexity of the situation. Just consider the circumstances faced by the millions upon millions of agrarian laborers and urban workers who compose the vast majority of the populations in Black Africa's forty-two states. On the most basic level, there is a crisis of agricultural production, in terms of both cash crops and production of food for subsistence. This is due partly to the long-term impact of colonial agrarian policies but also to the practices of independent African governments and their ruling classes, who too often fashioned more disincentives than incentives for agrarian producers. At the same time, world commodity markets and the transnational capitalist structures of which they are a part have played havoc with incentive systems available to African agrarian producers. Add to this the vagaries, often cruel, of climatic changes, which, in Africa, leave precious little room for human errors—be they errors by regimes or international lending institutions. Immediately one thinks of the deep and frequent droughts in the West African Sahel region in the 1970s and 1980s, or those in the northeast, in the Horn of Africa (Somalia and Ethiopia), none of which could be governed by world market forces. In short: an intricate interplay of governmental, world market, and climatic realities has spawned a developmental crisis in agriculture.

Linked to this crisis is a plethora of related political and social crises. Destitution is overwhelming in contemporary Africa. The continent now claims nearly 20 percent of the third world's poor population. A dramatic

downturn in government revenues from exports of cash crops began in the late 1970s, partly due to declining world commodity prices. This compelled many African states to cut back severely on already limited public services, especially expenditures for education and literacy. (African countries have the world's highest illiteracy rates.) Combine all these elements and it is not surprising that there is a frightening expansion of disenfranchised citizens—peasants and workers—who are increasingly averse to “modernity.” Its emotional, ethical, and cultural costs seem prohibitive to them.

Longstanding, deeply rooted human values—of family, of kinship, of communal reciprocity—have been stretched painfully, sometimes to the breaking point, leaving millions of Africans in a state of cultural limbo, of what Durkheim called anomie. It is a situation ripe for the type of dysfunctional political movements that Kenneth Jowitt recently called “movements of rage.” Such movements are typically restorationist, looking backward to a traditionalist “golden age” and rejecting pragmatic accommodation to modernity. The rejection is frequently accompanied by nihilistic violence.

Fortunately, there are elements of civil society in Africa that are attentive to this emerging cultural crisis. They can be found especially among egalitarian-minded professionals (writers, artists, journalists, some lawyers, and others). Noteworthy is the role played by Africa's educated women (together with uneducated women who are small traders) in challenging governments and elites to confront cultural anomie.

The African state is at the very center of the dialectic of crisis and change sweeping Africa. Several articles in this issue of *Dissent* are particularly concerned with the predicament of the African state. The colonial regimes (British, French, Belgian, Portuguese) were, of course, authoritarian, and they bequeathed an authoritarian inheritance to African politics. True, representative or participatory political methods (for example, elections, parties, and so on) were part of the decolonization process in most of Anglophone and Francophone Africa. But this was a shallow experience,

especially in institutional terms. It could not diminish colonialism's powerful statist legacy, one adverse to the healthy development of civil society. Indeed, the basic attributes of dictatorial regimes in independent Africa can be traced to the colonial statist experience.

The strength of African authoritarianism has often been linked to the interplay between African elites and transnational capitalist structures. At the same time, the impact of autocracy was especially dispiriting for African associational life—for farmers' leagues, lineage associations, ritual agencies, urban workers organizations, associations of women traders, middle-class groups. Yet these compose the elements of a potentially vital civil society in Africa that will be essential for a successful democratic and egalitarian reshaping of African states. The obstacles, however, are as formidable as the crises. One scholar, Crawford Young, has written of autocratic African client-states (either of the West or the former Eastern bloc) that,

in the most seriously deteriorated countries, the unravelling of the institutional fabric—public infrastructure, basic services, governmental apparatus—is so far advanced that alternative leadership which democratization might produce will have few resources or means to reconstruct a functioning state. Civil societies doubtless have far more modest expectations than the “terrestrial paradise” once promised [by single-party regimes]. But even these limited hopes may be disappointed, with uncertain consequences for the sustainability of democratization. In the worst cases (Zaire, Liberia, Somalia, Ethiopia), where utterly discredited autocrats clung to power through a final paroxysm of destructive violence, the devastation is so far-reaching that successors even with democratic commitments face chaotic circumstances bereft of resources.

The disabling of civil society also has its effects in “moderate” autocracies. Oppositionists find it difficult to mobilize significant numbers of people to protest government policies or actions, as Nicholas van de Walle, a leading observer of Cameroon, notes. “This not only makes toppling the government more problematic, it also has an impact on the nature of transitions, when and if they occur.” What you see is not always what you get; democrati-

zation can produce regimes ostensibly democratic but substantively plutocratic. "The weaker civil society is," says van de Walle, "the less accountable the groups who take over the state will be after the transition."

Whether the term "Afro-pessimism" is justified in the long run is yet to be seen. Its source, however, is quite visible: a deep and pulsating anger that is the product of three decades of authoritarianism after a century of imperialism. Will democratization be overwhelmed by "movements of rage"? Or will a broader politics take hold, one that finds the means to countervail both Africa's plutocrats and the demands of international economic institutions? Perhaps an alternative model is to be found in the strategy of the African National Congress (ANC).

The ANC has sought to discipline those within civil society who represented the "politics of anger" (for example, the black consciousness movement) and to link them to a broader political movement. The ANC's success led one observer, Steve Mufson, to remark in the *New Republic* that "civil society [in South Africa] has been both a base for overthrowing oppression and an embryo for a new nation." The ANC, under Nelson Mandela's skillful leadership, has insisted that its aim, in meshing the politics of anger with pragmatic politics, is to fashion a democratic

state that will also constrain the plutocratic capacities of transnational capitalist structures. Democratic forces in the rest of Africa, as they struggle against authoritarian regimes, might do well to approximate the ANC's example, however precarious the current situation in South Africa.

In this issue of *Dissent*, we present an array of outstanding African intellectuals and writers contemplating the difficulties faced by their continent. With their essays and analyses are reflections and reports by some leading Western observers of Africa. We have not tried to cover all dimensions of Africa today, something that would in any event be impossible given its diversity, complexity and size. At best, we address only aspects of Africa.

We have restricted ourselves to sub-Saharan Africa (what the French call *Afrique noire*). Most of the articles are directly political or social, but we have also tried to give readers a glimpse of contemporary Africa's vibrant culture, with essays on literature and cinema. This includes a remarkable exploration of "African Literature as Celebration" by Chinua Achebe, perhaps the continent's most celebrated author. If, in its own small way, this issue broadens American understanding of Africa—of the struggles and terrible dilemmas faced by Africans, together with their hopes—it will have served its purpose well. □

To Our Contributors:

A few suggestions:

- (1) Send two copies and be sure to keep a copy of your manuscript—the mails aren't always reliable. And please remember that we can't return articles unless they're accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.
- (2) Please don't write to ask whether we're interested in such and such an article—it makes for useless correspondence. Look at our last few issues to see if your idea fits in. Or take a chance and send us your article. We will not consider manuscripts submitted simultaneously to several publications.
- (3) Type your ms *double-spaced*, with *wide* margins. Check all your figures, dates, names, etc.—they're the author's responsibility. No dot matrix submissions, *please*.
- (4) Notes and footnotes should also be typed double-spaced, on a *separate* sheet. As we're not an academic journal, we prefer that they, wherever possible, be dropped altogether or worked into the text.
- (5) We're usually quick in giving editorial decisions. If there's a delay, it's because a few editors are reading your article.
- (6) Please bear with us—we have accumulated quite a backlog of material, and you may have to wait for a few issues before you see your article in print.

THE EDITORS □