Divisive democracy and popular struggle in Africa

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EDITORIAL

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In the post-Cold War international order, this journal has been concerned with the limitations of liberal democracy as demanded by donors, anticipating that it amounts to 'political stability rather than democracy' and 'various forms of authoritarian regime with strictly limited political pluralism' (Cliffe and Seddon 1991, 10). Issa Shivji (1991, 82) has argued that the liberal perspective of democracy is 'part of the ideology of domination – in Africa essentially a moment in the rationalisation and justification of compradorial rule.' More recently, in a series of workshops in Dakar known as 'Les Samedis de l'Économie', Ndongo Samba Sylla (2014, 52) claimed that 'there is no democratic government in the contemporary world' and, as Francis Fukuyama acknowledges, the prediction of the 'end of history' has met its end (*Ibid.* 69). Recalling Marx and Engels' observation that the dominant ideas of an epoch are just the ideas of the dominant class, Sylla qualifies his argument that:

> 'liberal democracy' or 'representative democracy' has nothing democratic, in the scholarly sense … often the idea is advanced that representation was rendered necessary because 'direct democracy' would be impossible in large states. There is no idea more false.

> The principal justification of the representative system was above all that government by the people is undesirable, not that it is unworkable … Even the notion of 'democratic elections' is an oxymoron which makes no sense in the framework of the liberal system of evaluation. (Sylla 2014, 51)

Periodic elections are open to manipulation and fail to fulfil popular aspirations for substantive political and economic change (Cheru 2012, 267). It is a consequence of the world-dominant 'political science of democratisation' (as opposed to the 'political economy of democratisation'), which is underpinned by a pessimistic, 'thin' formulation of democracy that envisages apathy and a lack of involvement from some individuals and groups (Saul 1997, 341; Sylla 2014, 52).

The collection of articles in this general issue (*ROAPE* 143) exposes some of the major characteristics and contradictions of liberal democracy as the political and moral arm of the global regime of capital accumulation. More critically, it shows that there are meaningful, and variegated, challenges to this regime found in post-2011 popular struggle that should also challenge the nihilistic turn in the study of international relations. The themes and patterns that emerge include: 1. the institutionalisation of the 'liberal' 'democratic' state as the dominant order, holding the 'legitimacy' to silence deviation using violence and violent discourse against dissent (Vidal, Paret, Shah); 2. this tendency discredits the representative system of democracy because racial, ethnic and other divisions continue to be important not only for the formation of today's capitalist 'leading democracies', but also for their continuity and survival in the neoliberal world. This is the essence of class relations and is also articulated in clientelism and exclusionary politics (Shah, Obadare, Webb – fundamentalisms may also be added, but are not included in this issue of the *Review*); 3. the substantiation of popular protest and resistance as the route to democratisation, exemplified in historical insights and contemporary change (Drew, Paret, Engels, Vidal, Bogaert); and 4. the question of ideology and intellectual approaches to contemporary struggle (Bogaert, Engels). Given the urgency of these

themes, this editorial attempts some ordering of these studies of democracy, protest and struggle in Angola, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria and South Africa.

1. The institutionalisation of the democratic state in the capitalist world order

The contributions in this issue of the *Review* from Nuno Vidal, Marcel Paret and Seema Shah emphasise the tendency of the modern state and its donors to contrast their own institutional 'order' with the 'disorder' of opponents. This is part of a trend that Fantu Cheru (2012, 277) characterises as 'the dramatic erosion of political space for democratic expression' at a time when many African countries are enjoying high levels of economic growth.

Vidal's article notes the construction of a 'Manichaean division' by the major donors to the Angolan state, separating the 'authentic and sensible' civil society organisations from the 'overly radical' ones that take more of a confrontationist approach to the regime. Similarly, in a study of community protests in South Africa, Marcel Paret's contribution distinguishes between procedural and substantive democracy. In so doing, he explains the reproduction of structural violence in the former as it creates oppositions between democracy and violence; between non-violent, legal and orderly, and violent, illegal and disorderly.

This dichotomising of democracy and violence reverberates in Kenya, as illustrated in Seema Shah's examination of the 2013 election, yet its contemporary politics are characterised by silencing rather than the protests identified by Paret. Her study supports Sylla's argument that:

> to understand the contemporary world, it is crucial to exit the liberal system of evaluation. The 'democracy' of our days is just a label, which only has value to those who give it and believe it. (Sylla 2014, 52)

Shah interrogates the conception of 'free and fair' elections from the perspective of voters rather than the usual international observers. Her findings are that the propaganda of the 'peace-ocracy' campaign, on the heels of the trauma of post-election violence in 2008, led more than half of the respondents to indicate that 'peace is worth a flawed election.' This led critical irregularities in the counting to be overlooked in the setting of a heavily pacified media.

2. The centrality of ethnicity and race in the development and survival of today's 'democracies'

The strongest influence over voters in Shah's study, prioritised even over peace, was ethnic identity. Although new laws in Kenya might move ethnicity away from politics in the future, her article shows the continuing importance of patronage politics, by which co-ethnics of those in power tend to benefit disproportionately in development. It is part of a broader pattern of division, in which Ebenezer Obadare reminds us of Mahmood Mamdani's analysis of despotic colonialism that roughly created divisions between 'rural subjects' and 'urban citizens'. This dividing is recognised by Bogaert as a continuing process in Morocco, as metropolitan growth remains the focus of development and rural, mountainous and inland areas face deprivation.

In Nigeria (and other parts of Africa), Obadare links the belligerence from the state, religious leaders and the media towards alternative sexualities precisely with the question of who is or ought to be a citizen, and more broadly with the conjuncture of race, globalisation, and 'new dimensions of eroticism'. He argues that ethno-ideological aims are refracted through 'sexual struggles (or struggles over sexuality)' and 'are nearly always a foil for other forms of contestations – social, economic,

political' as capitalist globalisation (re)fractures societies. In such struggles, the lexicon of rights and entitlement in liberal politics appeal, yet it is those same 'modernising' forces that have structured social and economic ruptures and the crisis of citizenship.

Beyond the divisions that have created state power and are rearticulated when it is challenged and privatised, the core barrier to democracy in capitalism is that it is founded on race relations of production. Christopher Webb's examination of Ruth First's scrapbooks from 1947–50 shows her reporting on creeping fascism and violent racism in South Africa, as she launched her career as a campaigning journalist. First was preoccupied by labour conditions in Bethal, which she found to be 'like a story from the history of some ancient slave empire', and reported on the growing forms of resistance to racist legislation. She depicted the trade in human beings that would secure a form of racial capitalism, later describing a 'capitalist social formation … without the features of a bourgeois-democratic state precisely because forms of labour coercion, buttressed by race and national oppression, are essential to the process of accumulation'.

Citing South Africa's Nazi-inspired apartheid system, Sylla (2014, 54) draws on the work of Charles Wright Mills to expound the Western political system as the 'Racial Contract' rather than a social one. David Theo Goldberg (2009, 329) argues that race is not an antique notion, but instead is 'an irreducibly modern notion defining and refining modern state formation as [the] new form of planetary globalization takes place'. He shows the importance of viewing the racial division of labour not only as a 'legacy' that the liberal world system might seek to overcome, but as a continuous and shifting process that institutionalises the same divisions. He explains the process of 'Racial Southafricanisation', by which:

> the neoliberalising of race displaces … sovereignty from the state to the realm of the economic, diffusing it from state authority to less identifiable, at once more open and less resistable structural forces. The constitutional constraints on state sovereignty are circumvented to some degree by the privatisation of social power. (Goldberg 2009, 321)

The apartheid system is distinguishable as an explicitly racial classification scheme, but its division of labour is less exceptional in that race relations of production continue to underpin capitalist development in Africa and the world, created by violent processes of subjectification, division and hierarchy within the liberalised constellation of power (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

3. The substantiation of popular protest and resistance as the route to democratisation

A decade after Ruth First's scrapbooks (see Webb in this issue) had documented the radicalisation of the African National Congress (ANC) by the formation of its Youth League, Allison Drew's contribution examines the launch of South Africa's armed struggle in the early 1960s. She shows that the Left was 'fluid and eclectic' during the transitional period, building new underground networks based on political and personal contacts. The Algerian war influenced the thinking of a range of left-wing activists, as seen in an account from Nelson Mandela's journal of his contact with senior and important figures inside the *Front de Libération Nationale*. This provides much of the missing *raison d'être* for the South African Communist Party/ANC turn to the armed struggle. It reveals how Mandela was impressed and informed by the 'enthusiasm' of the 'fantastic crowds' in Oujda viewing a 'kind of walking history of the guerrilla movement' in 1962, when Ahmed Ben Bella had been released from prison. Mandela came to consider that strikes, boycotts and demonstrations would not

suffice in the struggle. Drew's article challenges the sanitised image of Mandela as a 'moderate' who could 'transcend' ideological differences when liberal democratic leaders such as Tony Blair and Barack Obama were compelled, after his death, to situate the anti-apartheid activist in the non-violent, orderly sphere of the liberal democratic state (Beresford 2014).

In modern South Africa, Paret shows that protests necessarily challenge the structural violence of the state, which provides full voting rights and freedom of speech while income inequality expands and poor citizens are excluded from direct state decision-making. Formal channels do not engage. Thus, 'the only language [political officials] understand is protest,' or as another protester explained:

> we were having something like nine peaceful marches ... Nobody is speaking about those ones. They are only speaking about KFC [which was burned down] … They think KFC is better than us. (cited in Paret, in this issue)

In Burkina Faso, Bettina Engels examines the relationship between riots, especially those in 2008–9 against the high cost of living, and more organised and sustained forms of protest by trade unions and other established oppositional organisations. She finds ambivalence in the strategy of the latter to refer to the riots as a means of strengthening their position with the government. It reinforces trade unions' position as a negotiating partner of the government, but risks maintaining discourses that may legitimate structural violence from the government. Echoing the dichotomy between 'democracy and violence' in Paret's article, she finds in the protest organisations' discourse that there is a dichotomy between 'organised', 'controlled' and 'peaceful' with 'clear aims' on one side, and 'spontaneous', 'uncontrolled' and 'aimless' on the other. However, Engels found that their relationship was complementary in that the riots had a 'positive flank effect', strengthening the position of the moderates.

Nuno Vidal presents a more antagonistic relationship between the civil society activists he determines as reformist and confrontationist - both groups aiming for socio-political transformation in Angola. Both types of civil society organisation consider the state's characteristics to be authoritarian, oppressive and opaque, and aim for transformation. The institutionalists who attempt 'constructive engagement' and reform find that they are unable to participate in policy decision-making structures or to engage in dialogue, despite having the funds to implement projects. Young revolutionaries, however, challenge a regime that they see as 'only democratic in appearance, concealing a sophisticated dictatorship supported by international economic interests and political alliances'. They raise concern from the government but lack the broader appeal to the 'poor and marginalised', or a political project beyond toppling the president.

In Morocco, Koenraad Bogaert presents a more successful dialogue between protesters, the people, and the state. King Mohamed VI stresses the importance of 'good governance', human rights, economic development and citizen participation, and this offers previously imprisoned activists the means to be active outside party politics and militant trade unionism. Protests have led to violent clashes but have also created immediate results, including the reversal of a rise in the cost of bread and, impressively, the creation of thousands of new jobs in an impoverished mining town.

4. Ideology and transformation

In 2001 (387–8), Graham Harrison argued for 'bringing political struggle back in', noting that it had fallen out of academic favour, creating more 'nihilistic strains of

post-structuralism' and the 'triumphalism of a schematic liberalism (articulated with increasing power as the World Bank consolidates a greater intellectual presence)' (Harrison 2001, 387–8). A subsequent trend in academic thinking has been not only to depoliticise and dehistoricise, but also to desocialise human relations. While opposing the liberal modernist framework, 'actor-network theory', 'new materialist' and 'posthuman' approaches have an equivalent capacity to assume and obscure the global structure of power, and so might become just as influential. They remove humans from the 'laws and regularities operating both in "nature" and through social relations', instead locating them in the world of objects and object relations, and in doing so, they 'remove the meaningfulness of the world itself' (Chandler 2013, 534). This shift in social science necessitates the struggle for ideas in academia and policy-making alongside the urban and rural frontiers of class struggle, as the former drift further away from the latter.

How does one make sense of the mosaic of struggles in Africa that is apparently energised by the Arab revolutions of 2011? Koenraad Bogaert draws on Rosa Luxemburg to point out that the recent political and democratic protests in Morocco, and the history of socio-economic protests, cannot be viewed as unrelated phenomena but are part of the same process, by which 'local particularistic expressions of resistance can easily transform into challenges on a broader political level, and vice versa;' also clear in Webb's analysis of Ruth First's journalism. To emphasise the apolitical economic demands of political action is to contribute to liberal conceptualisations of what is 'economic' or 'political', yet the nature of restructuring in neoliberal globalisation makes it impossible to separate them. Engels and Bogaert both historicise food riots in the context of waves of protest against capitalist development. They show how political and academic debates linked political actions with ideas of liberal democracy and good governance; while the mass revolts of the 1980s were about injustice as much as impoverishment. Social forces linked political and economic change. Bogaert further recounts from Luxemburg that we should not underestimate 'the most precious, because lasting, thing in the rapid ebb and flow of the wave, namely its mental sediment'.

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