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African social movements

Franco Barchiesi

Introduction: on the applicability of the “social movement” concept to African contentious politics

The rise, in the Western academia of the second half of the twentieth century, of “social movements” as a distinct object of disciplinary expertise has largely ignored or sidestepped the politics of contention and conflict in colonial and postcolonial Africa. The continent has for long been marginalized or excluded from the programs, journals, associations, conferences, or textbooks that over the past six decades have established “social movement studies” as a field. Popular protests in the first two decades of the twenty-first century—such as the “Arab Spring” ignited in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, “service delivery” struggles in South Africa, or West African mobilizations over the “quality of life”—have started to be reflected in the “case studies” sections of prominent introductory works. Yet, African thought and practices still occupy a precarious and evanescent place in theorizations of social movements and conflicts aspiring to a global reach. At the same time, “social movements” do not figure prominently among the core concerns and priorities of African Studies, especially as far as historiography or cultural theory are concerned.

Even attempts at providing comprehensive scholarly overviews of African social movements have been few and far between, reflecting the uneasy discrepancy between social movement studies as a field aiming at conceptual and methodological coherence and the exceeding complexity of African contentious politics. In the mid-1990s, a pioneering collection was edited by Mahmood Mamdani and Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba, followed, twenty-four years later, by an anthology gathered by Ellis and van Kessel. The introduction to this latter work reflects on the possible reasons for the difficulty of locating Africa within social movement studies. The editors emphasized that, as a concept, “social movements” are mostly defined by a concern, prevalent in European or North American social sciences, with departing from popular grievances and the assumed irrationality of “the crowd”—key problems in the social history of the onset of capitalism and the nation-state—and centering, instead, on movements’ structures and strategies, deliberate significations, and the opportunities provided by the political system. Such conceptual coordinates made African conflicts legible to Western scholars applying social movement theory to the “pro-democracy” struggles of the early 1990s. Not only did such analyses evaluate African struggles in relation to Western notions of “social movement,” but also assumed “civil society” to be their obvious
Theoretical differences verged, therefore, on the meaning of civil society itself. Liberals understood it as a realm of associational life claiming autonomy and accountability from the state, while left critics saw it as a terrain of contestation over cultural hegemony, social policies, and political allegiances. Ellis and van Kessel lamented that such interpretative grids—narrowly focused on transparent motivations and framing, as well as a normative opposition between “movement” and “crowd”—relegated much of African socio-political contestation, even within the mobilizations of the 1990s, to illegibility and invisibility, when not social pathology. Especially problematic was whether “social movement” as a concept could account for non-democratic features of “pro-democracy” movements, their ambivalent relations and connections with the very authoritarian states they aimed to transform, and their articulation with global actors and agendas (from NGOs to international financial institutions). Most importantly, such movements appeared to be grounded not so much in specific organizational structures and explicit claims, but in broad and diffuse social networks often inspired by ethnic or religious identifications, which complicated notions of a “secular” modernity that, in mainstream scholarship, made “new social movements” the outlets for “post-materialist” demands over lifestyle and recognition, beyond the economic grievances that had animated older movements, like labor. The very distinction between material and immaterial claims seemed to disappear in African struggles where religious or ethnic solidarity often operates as a vital precondition to seize or reclaim access to basic necessities as well as protection against state violence.

African scholars, on the other hand, have questioned the applicability of “social movement studies” not just as a disciplinary label, but also as a concept implicated in a certain European and American epistemic imperialism of colonial derivation. Mamadou Diouf deprecated the “mystique of social movements” informing scholars’ hopes for a post-authoritarian liberal democracy as well as expectations for a “second independence” among many African analysts. Diouf referred to the extensive work conducted by Algerian political scientist, Ali el-Kenz, who—in the context of his country’s bloody civil war and rising Islamist opposition in the mid-1990s—emphasized a profound ambiguity in African collective mobilizations, which for him required challenging the impoverished “sociological imagination” of social movement theory. For el-Kenz, social movement studies were integral to the export to the (post-)colony of a “cold science’ of the North,” of dubious relevance in theorizing African conflicts. To understand shifts and overlaps in collective identities—from socio-economic demands to opposition against authoritarian bureaucracies and confrontation along the axes of “the polymorphous spaces and quicksands of religion, of values and behaviours”—el-Kenz invoked a diachronic approach focused on the historicity and long duration of specific social, economic, and cultural dynamics, instead of focusing exclusively on the present tense of institutional crisis and reform.

The need to conceptualize African conflicts and mobilizations through their constitutive ambiguity also informed Mahmood Mamdani’s proposed differentiation between “social movements,” “popular movements,” and “democratic movements.” At stake here is more than just a more capacious concept of “social movement,” adequate to grasp African complexities and specificities. African critics have in fact questioned the very imposition on the continent of periodizations reflecting European dilemmas, chiefly the need to categorize a break between colonialism and post-colonial independence, which eludes the linkages between anticolonial struggles and contemporary mobilizations. Social movement theory’s obsessive emphasis on the legibility and transparency of ideologies, identifiable activists or cadres, material or symbolic resources, and narratives that “frame” issues, claims, or identities
is equally problematic. For Achille Mbembe, “the extraordinary poverty of the political science and economics literature” of Euro-American derivation—of which he specifically targeted notions of “agency,” “resistance,” “negotiation,” and discursive “invention”—follows from racial representations, which, in Hegel’s footsteps, assuaged the anxiety of Western thought toward Africa’s opacity and darkness. By being posited as universal standards of scholarly evaluation, ideas of “social movement” and “civil society” result in reading Africa mostly as an aberrant deviation, reflecting—Mbembe continues—a long-standing, heavily racialized identification of the continent with the very ideas of “absence,” “lack,” “non-being,” and endless stagnation without history.

Mbembe’s critique allows for a theorization of Blackness and race as structural—rather than biological, cultural, or ideological—factors determining the positioning of Africa in global relations of domination. African studies—and, by extension, analyses of African contentious politics—have generally neglected the structural salience of race in explaining oppression, endurance, and resistance in the colonial and post-independence contexts. Historian Jemima Pierre writes that African and African diaspora studies have failed to “fully appreciate the sociohistorical reality of Black identity formation on the African continent and its articulations with global notions of Blackness.” No surprise, then, that a recent collection introducing key concepts for a critical study of Africa does not contain chapters on either “race” or “Blackness.” Yet, Pierre continues, even in countries, like Ghana, “with no clear-cut history of de jure apartheid or White-settler politics and ultimately no overt anti-Black racism,” Blackness is an abjection, upholding whiteness as a condition of normality and virtue, for example through the ubiquitous commercialization of skin-bleaching cosmetics. Denise Ferreira da Silva has proposed a way for advancing—in structural rather than identity terms—the “articulation” between Africa and global Blackness Pierre advocates. Da Silva’s concept of “raciality” defines the deployment of race as a “strategy of power”—underpinned by modalities of Western knowledge claiming scientific objectivity—that subsumes Africanness into Blackness through violent “engulfment” by globally anti-Black dynamics of domination that transcend Africa itself, spanning the long duration marked by enslavement, colonialism, neocolonialism, neoliberal structural adjustment, and “color-blind” multicultural liberal democracy. Da Silva’s nexus of racial knowledge and enslavist, colonial, and genocidal anti-Black violence emphasizes both the positing of Africa as an object of comparison—whereby, as Hegel had it, universal human civilization can only exist in radical contradistinction from Blackness-as-Africa—and its structural logic as paradigmatically centered not on capitalism and class, but race and anti-Blackness. Mbembe’s insight that Western socio-scientific knowledge has a tendency of holding Africa as a pathological term of comparison resonates, then, with global Black theorizing on the mutually reinforced relations between anti-Blackness, the optic of race, and academic knowledge. Frantz Fanon focused on “comparison” as the putatively objective yet inherently dehumanizing modality of positioning Black being in an anti-Black world.

The work of theorists advocating an analytic of global Blackness for the study of Africa carries two important consequences for the purpose of providing a critical introduction to African social movements. First, the very category “social movement” is implicated, through its putative universality, in epistemic modalities assuming that only what is comparatively legible and translatable in the terms of Western academic protocols “counts” as a legitimate object of knowledge. Second, that very assumptive logic is a reflection of racial power and domination to the extent it casts Africa as a “problem” to be deciphered and translated with the tools of Western social science, rather than the point of enunciation of a Black, Pan-African, or anticolonial critique “rewriting knowledge” and demanding...
a radical questioning of social science paradigms. It is instructive that such questioning is now demanded precisely by a Pan-African student movement—"Rhodes Must Fall," starting in South Africa and then expanding to Europe and North America—which targets both racial violence and the way it informs colonial frameworks of academic knowledge. It is, perhaps, a vindication of Sylvia Wynter’s call for “knowledge of the streets” to disrupt the institutionalization of the classroom. It is also to be noted that such disruption—which inevitably affects social movement theory in ways that it neither anticipates nor, perhaps, welcomes—comes from the practice of globally Black mobilizations. “Practice” is the term Saidiya Hartman preferred to “agency,” “contestation,” and “resistance.” Hartman regards such concepts as inadequate and potentially harmful ways of conceptualizing Black survival, sociality, and culture as the objectified targets of racial domination and generalized sexual violation in the transatlantic context defined by the Middle Passage, plantation slavery, and a “travestied” abolition that reinstated Black captivity in the Americas while providing arguments for the European colonization of Africa. For Hartman, “practice” is a notion more appropriate to theorizing Black social life amid the suppression of subjective autonomy, constant exposure to gratuitous violent assault, ambivalent or opaque boundaries between accommodation and transgression, and pervasive vulnerability. It also allows Hartman to appreciate, in their complexity, ambiguities, and contradictions, the forms of togetherness, spirituality, and performance that sustain Black endurance and allow longings for freedom and fugitivity to break through the veils of seeming compliance and ever-present terror. For Hartman the conceptual arsenal of social movement theory—with its focus on subjective claims and conscious strategizing—is of little use, to the extent it is geared to contesting power relations manifesting themselves as hegemony, not the direct, violent, non-negotiable force marking, in Hartman’s words, the “accumulation” and “fungibility” of Black being. Hartman, finally, criticizes the disciplinary insularity of African studies by insisting that, on the two shores of the Atlantic, the Middle Passage has permanently and traumatically brought Blackness into the same global structural frame—“skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment”—which she terms the “afterlife of slavery.”

Black thought is challenging the study of African social movements to reject the mechanical internalization of concepts and theories that are not accountable to, again in Fanon’s terms, “the lived experience of Blackness.” Fanon himself was well aware that African nationalist leaders and working-class organizations were constantly tempted with normatively incorporating European modalities of organizing and claim-making, which determined a structural disconnect between the nation-building aspirations of urban-based elites and the vast African peasantry and lumpenproletariat confronting, in the colonial context, not just a denial of sovereignty, but the forceful erasure of Black humanity. Far from embracing progressive notions of agency and resistance, Fanon ultimately envisioned Black anticolonial revolution as a “leap” beyond politics itself, a world-ending force demanded by the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness as the force that ultimately structured the “colonial situation.” Fanon’s reflections on the tension between political liberation and Black revolution have inspired Frank Wilderson’s afro-pessimist critique of social movement politics as inherently anti-Black. Slavery as a global paradigm of gratuitous violence—or violence that is not the response to a prior transgression—constitutes Blackness, Wilderson writes, as a structural positionality of social death, upon which only can rest the stability of non-Black people’s forms of life, freedom, capacity, and relationality. Black liberation can only ultimately point, therefore, at the revolutionary antagonism between Blackness and the World itself. What social movement politics has to offer instead, Wilderson continues, is a prospect of
redemption Black people can only claim on condition that Blackness—as a structurally antagonistic positionality—is repudiated and replaced with a politics of cultural identity allowing the expression of Black demands through protocols (such as the liberation or emancipation of women, workers, and colonized nationalities) that are translatable into social movements and admissible to coalitional politics. The framing of social movements’ demands around “third terms”—be they related to national liberation, gender equality, land restitution, civil rights, migrants’ inclusion, decolonization, or the reappropriation of surplus-value—mediating the conflicts between resistant subjects and the state can thus only be premised on consigning Blackness, as an ethico-political position demanding nothing less than the “end of the world,” to silence and invisibility, when not actually defining Blackness as a threat for a politics of social movements’ solidarity. Jared Sexton has argued that Black liberation absolutely defies analogy with any project of political redemption, since it threatens the world precisely by being ultimately irrepresentable and irreducible to any definite set of demands and elusive for any organizational framing of social subjectivity.24

In its racism and violence, colonialism in Africa did not result in the complete, irreparable, and irreversible loss of land and cultural sovereignty, which marked the Middle Passage. The imbrication of colonialism in global anti-Blackness has nonetheless made such African “temporal and cartographic coordinates,” in Wilderson’s terms, absolutely open and vulnerable to white interventions premised on the devaluation and disposability of Black being. Not only has this specifically anti-Black violence manifested itself in the “necropolitical”25 order of colonial rule and what Fanon denounced as “neocolonial” independence under the twin shadows of Western imperialism and domestic authoritarianism. It also continues to devastate African societies in the wake of structural adjustment policies and economic restructuring imposed by international financial organizations and embraced by local elites at immense and often deadly cost to African peoples at all levels of class and gender.

The following sections will discuss different forms of African contentious politics, in various geographical contexts and with a focus on the post-independence reality as shaped by colonialism and anticolonial struggles. The aim is not so much to survey such an empirically multifaceted landscape through the conceptual lens of “social movements,” whose explanatory ambitions are, this introduction has shown, hollow and problematic to say the least. My interest is rather in conceptualizing how specific experiences speak to an African challenge to social movement theory. At the same time, caution is warranted on the possibility of “decolonizing” social movements, an endeavor to which scholarship influenced by subaltern, postcolonial, and indigenous studies has applied itself.26 Social movement studies have privileged legible claims and contestations over hegemony. Even critics of social movements who have centered the contentious yet demandless articulation of the poor’s quotidian “life politics,” “quiet encroachments,” and “everyday forms of resistance”27 remain nonetheless attached to the political as a terrain where power can be contested and claims can find satisfaction in symbolic or material outcomes. Placing Africa in relation to global Blackness and Black theory highlights the limitations of such approaches when confronted to power that ordinarily takes the form of lethal and gratuitous violence rather than the hegemonic solicitation of consent or even the capitalistically enforced necessity of producing surplus.

**From anticolonial movements to black consciousness**

Before the rise of national movements in the interwar years, and their capacity appeal to the masses following, African opposition to colonialism had reflected and responded to modalities of domination geared at enforcing divisions between urban and rural areas
and among ethnic groups that were variously institutionalized and differentially rewarded by colonial states. While opposition to wage labor mostly took the form of escape and migration, protest and confrontation targeted taxation, land seizures, compulsory cultivations, or state violence and could either be supported by local notables disgruntled with colonial interference or address the oppressiveness of “chiefs” appointed by colonial administrators. Early resistance to European rule was mostly localized and cannot be easily categorized according to claims or organizations, as it was rather propelled by religious or spiritual visions of moral and social regeneration. Usually violently repressed, insurgencies like the Zimbabwean Chimurenga of 1896–1897, the Maji-Maji in Tanganyika between 1905 and 1907, the 1915 Chilembwe revolt in Nyasaland (Malawi), Simon Kimbangu’s agitation in the Congo during the 1920s, or South Africa’s Israelite movement in 1921 responded to the material devastation and cultural disorientation caused by the colonial conquest and, especially after World War I, socioeconomic hardship and declining living standards. They also, however, found in appeals to ultramundane regeneration an alternative to a reality of racialized rule that, for the vast majority of the African population, allowed neither participation in “civil society” nor the possibility of contesting power in “counter-hegemonic” forms. The salience of spirituality and transcendence underpinned, nonetheless, vital connections with Black communities outside Africa, to which white terror had similarly denied opportunities for political expression. Ethiopian churches started as African believers broke away from established denominations in the peculiarly dehumanizing conditions of the mining economy in late nineteenth century Transvaal (South Africa) and rapidly spread across the continent. Ethiopianism was an early Pan-African movement as it built connections, in the United States, with African American churches, which provided educational opportunities through missionary work and the sponsoring of African students at American institutions. Opponents of colonialism like John Chilembwe of Malawi and John Dube, the first president of the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, decisively benefitted from such transatlantic relations.

Pan-Africanist discourse would then take different forms, which greatly inspired anticolonial resistance until the final days of European rule, despite the movement’s uneven diffusion and its prevalence among Christian and Western-educated sectors in urban areas. Garveyism established itself in the 1920s, in the face of considerable repression by colonial authorities, mostly through UNIA branches in port cities, like Freetown and Cape Town, of territories under British control. In South Africa, Garveyism significantly influenced the ANC’s gradual turn to overt critique of white rule as well as nascent trade union organizations, especially the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU). The Pan-African congresses of the first half of the twentieth century also provided opportunities for African nationalist leaders to develop—through critical conversations across the Black world—an imagination of self-government, equal rights, and socioeconomic advancement. Casely-Hayford’s National Congress of British West Africa in the 1920s; Isaac Wallace-Johnson’s work in the Nigerian labor movement and the West African Youth League in the 1930s; African mobilizations against the Italian Fascist invasion of Ethiopia in 1935; and the formative experiences of Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, and Nnamdi Azikiwe occurred in this rich, ideologically diverse, geographically plural milieu.

Colonialism inserted Africa in global markets and circuits of capitalist investment by exacerbating the continent’s vulnerability caused by dependence on the export of primary commodities. The resulting boom-and-bust cycles—determined by the international prices of raw materials—and the coercive extraction of African resources (land, taxes, forced labor), especially in wartime, proved especially devastating to food production and local commerce.
Economic exploitation and poverty ruptured roles and relations sanctioned by popular moralities and traditions, resulting in collective protests. African women’s opposition to colonialism was thus particularly acute in areas, especially across West Africa, where women controlled urban markets. Diffuse and not necessarily confrontational, such mobilizations became at times overt and spectacular, as in the 1929 “Aba Women’s War,” in Nigeria’s Igboland, which expressed a comprehensive rejection of the colonial system in its political, economic, and ideological facets, as well as its despotic violation, with the complicity of male “warrant chiefs,” of women’s power and prerogatives in community life.

If one takes—as a starting point in trying to conceptualize African opposition to colonialism as a historical antecedent to contemporary mobilizations—the multi-layered landscape here briefly outlined, as well as its complex articulation of explicit ideologies, ethical motifs, and spiritual affinities, then postwar African nationalism cannot be considered a social movement. The nationalist parties that developed during colonialism’s final phase envisaged “national liberation” as a unifying banner geared to providing discipline, symbolic coherence, and a mass political projection to a range of rather inchoate collective identities. Memories of struggle largely pre-existed the inception of nationalist rhetoric and often voiced antagonism to colonialism through highly localized, not overtly political practices of subversion and refusal, like the physical escape from wage labor and taxation or the unauthorized production and smuggling of food crops. Fanon had emphasized the discrepancy between a “national consciousness” limited to the educated and Westernized urban bourgeoisie and the plight of the poor, the unemployed, and a largely rural population who would only follow leaders committed to a radical break with anti-Black colonial violence, and not just a political and institutional transition away from the colonial state. It is perhaps true that, as Fred Cooper writes, the African working class was more confrontational and less available to cooption by the nationalist bourgeoisie than Fanon had thought. The strike waves affecting Senegal, Mali, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ghana, Katanga, Kenya, Nyasaland, and South Africa during the 1940s proved decisive in marking the obsolescence and unsustainability of European rule. Labor mobilizations did not go, however, in the direction of revolutionary alliances between workers and peasants and were rather politically capitalized by nationalist parties charting their way to independence by working within the mechanisms of late colonial reforms while keeping a watchful eye on the undesirable unruliness of the masses.

With the exception of the victorious war for Algeria’s independence (1954–1962)—replicated in the seventies by the overthrow of white rule in Zimbabwe and Portuguese colonialism in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau—revolutionary warfare remained confined to exceptions that were brutally suffocated by the colonial state (the Madagascar insurrection of 1947; Kenya’s Mau Mau in 1952–1956) or its African neocolonial replacements (the Cameroonian rebellion from 1956 to 1970). Sometimes, avowedly Black anticolonial and antiracist revolutions were reinited in by postcolonial leaders anxious to douse popular radicalism and forestall feared Communist infiltration in the name of national unity and developmental nation-building, as in the case of the 1964 Afro-Shirazi revolution against Arab rule in Zanzibar, resulting in the island’s absorption into independent Tanzania. The post-independence leaders’ obsession with unification along national lines proved fatal to projects of radical transformation. Labor movements were in most cases realigned under increasingly despotic regimes using a mix of overt repression, threats against workers’ allegedly better-off social status, cooptation at leadership level, and modest social benefits. The consolidation of African independences within the framework of “national” borders inherited from colonialism and neocolonial subjection to Western imperialism also accompanied the eclipse of Pan-Africanism, at least as an alternative option for a continent liberated from European rule.
African peasants proved less amenable to control by former pro-independence movements now bent on occupying the bureaucratic apparatus of the state and positions of economic intermediaries between global capitalists and local markets and business. Agricultural producers faced postcolonial states engaged in coercive modalities of surplus extraction that mirrored the most predatory proclivities of colonial regimes. While strategies of disengagement from market relations continued to prove a vital survival asset in times of deep economic crisis, peasant opposition occasionally took the form of overt insurgency, as in the Mulelist revolution of Congo’s Kwilu region between 1963 and 1965. Direct and collective peasants’ action generally revealed, however, a picture that is more complicated than clear-cut distinctions between “tacit” protest masked as acquiescence and overt rebellion with revolutionary pretensions. On one hand, ethnic identifications proved a powerful factor of fragmentation, deepened by states that configured networks of patronage along ethnic lines. On the other hand, if the postcolonial “deracialization” of citizenship opened the way to a “re-ethnicitization” of the political space, it also disclosed unexpected avenues to peasants’ movements and organizations. The salience of the ethnic factor was, in any case, counterbalanced by the growing reliance of rural cooperatives and development associations on global donors, NGOs, and aid agencies. International support was mostly channeled through local governmental mechanisms reflecting Western technocratic notions of development and modernization, which were profoundly racialized and anti-Black to the extent they assumed African growers and pastoralists to be an unduly irrational and atavistic burden on the land’s “carrying capacity,” unless their activities took place under the supervision of experts—often produced by colonial administrations—aligned with Western economic epistemes. In some cases, however, as in Senegal and Mali between the 1960s and the 1970s, international support was used by peasant movements transcending ethnic constituencies to build solidarity against governmental exactions and neglect. Despite occasionally resorting to confrontation, it proved difficult for these movements to maintain their independence as the state, both a major recipient of development aid and the gatekeeper for commercial opportunities, reabsorbed them within its networks of patronage, which sometimes allowed leaders of peasant associations to rise to the ranks of the political elite.

Student movements were a peculiarly thorny challenge for independent African states, since they expressed not only collective disgust at the continuities with the colonial past—of which younger generations had increasingly tenuous memories based on direct experience—but especially disillusionment toward leaders blamed for betraying the hopes of decolonization for democracy and human dignity, but also jobs and material improvements. Most postcolonial governments heavily emphasized the emancipatory potential of schooling and, in the absence of a diversified economic base, students regarded state employment as a desirable life path. Education also allowed a heightened perception of the gap between the promise and reality of independence, as well as insights—reinforced by intellectual currents across the Black world—into the imperial and anti-Black paradigm structuring Africa’s insertion in the postwar “community of nations.” Recent scholarship has documented, against the neglect in earlier research, the post-independence vitality of African student movements, even reclaiming a place for the continent in the “global 1968,” the imagination of which had done much to turn “new social movements” into a hot academic topic, and yet had completely ignored Africa. Student protests across North Africa did indeed catalyze popular opposition and solidarity from parents, workers, and unemployed people. In some cases, most notably Tunisia, they were also organizationally connected with the coeval Parisian insurrection. Students were the most vocal opponents of the authoritarian turn in Zaire (today’s Democratic Republic of the Congo) following the US-sponsored assassination of Patrice Lumumba.
and the rise to dictatorial power of Joseph Mobutu in 1965. In Ethiopia, students mobilized against American military bases; in Tanzania, they lambasted the government’s acceptance of American economic aid. In Senegal, protesting students demanding jobs and food were joined by striking workers in a conflict that, by March 1968, had brought the government close to collapse. As military repression, aided by French troops, quickly regained the upper hand, the movement’s international resonance caused much damage to the reputation of President Senghor and the neocolonial leanings marring his version of negritude.43

The key place, in African students’ repertoires, of anti-imperialist critique as well as the denunciation of the racial logics of neocolonialism and foreign interference, speaks to a resurgence of Pan-Africanist political affinities and imaginative connections within a long Black 1968—if one takes that year as somewhat representative of the full arc of the transatlantic Black revolutionary cycle from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s44—which is obscured by rejections of Africa’s place in a generic “global” 1968. What is at stake here is, in other words, the importance of locating African struggles in the global trajectory of Black Power, rather than finding a place for African conflicts in the sociological or politological literature on “new social movements.” Such stakes are particularly evident in the thought and action of Steve Biko and South Africa’s Black Consciousness Movement as a unique point of convergence of student activism, Black revolution, and an indictment of the anti-Blackness informing the “nonracial” rubrics of white and non-Black left radicalism.45 Not only was Biko keenly connected to the terms of a continental debate—deeply influenced by Fanon, negritude, and African socialism—on what Black liberation fully and actually entails, beyond the Western-orchestrated pageantry of the sovereign nation-state. His dialogue, at a greater geographical distance, with Black theology and existentialism in Europe and America also configured the demand for Black humanity as uncompromising opposition to the social, political, economic, and ideological structures for which the violent denial of Black humanity is a quintessential condition of existence and vitality. A specific target of Biko’s critique was the anti-Blackness of the white liberal left and “class analysis,” which for him could only operate as modes of critical engagement by silencing, thereby perpetuating, Black suffering.46 Black consciousness as a global aspiration for Black leadership in Black revolution was for Biko the adequate articulation of such suffering, an articulation whose definition in terms of “politics” and “movements” was nonetheless hampered by the policing and patronizing deployed by more properly political movements against the prospect of Black self-determination.

The radicalism of African students expressed an acute awareness of the crisis of the post-independence dispensation, a crisis that was devastating the lives of young people through the unique convergence of its many vectors: economic vulnerability, existential precariousness, a sense of being betrayed by their elders, the anti-Black racial logic inherent to neocolonial domination and imperialist exploitation. By the 1980s, responses to socioeconomic collapse through the brutality of neoliberal structural adjustment would bring to the fore new opportunities for radicalization as well as new forces of fragmentation of African struggles.

African mobilizations in the age of structural adjustment

The deepening profit squeeze in major capitalist economies during the 1970s determined a collapse of state revenues backed by the export of African primary commodities, exposing the insolvency of African governments, which had previously borrowed on generous terms from international lenders to fund their development projects. The resulting “debt crisis,” as
scholars intent on primarily blaming the faults of African governments called it, was met with merciless determination by foreign creditors and the international organizations deputized to represent them, primarily the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The “structural adjustment programs” such organizations devised were extremely punitive for African people. The market liberalizing and business-friendly logic informing such policies reflected the ideological tenets that critics had by then identified as “neoliberalism.” Despite the end of authoritarian governments and the rise of multi-party systems in most of the continent during the 1990s, new liberal-democratic states and elected leaders had little or no say over structural adjustment programs and their strict conditionalities. The drastic downsizing in government programs and employment, the removal of subsidies on basic necessities, the opening of domestic markets to international competition, and a renewed emphasis on the export of raw materials to the detriment of food crops and local systems of subsistence plunged hundreds of millions into poverty or death, causing immense damage to virtually every African social strata, from the formally employed to the urban poor, from rural food growers to the informal sector, from students to businesspeople.

The shrinkage of the African state did not necessarily penalize the political elites, which found new self-enrichment opportunities in the privatizing sectors of the economy, but decisively eroded existing networks for access to public resources. Structural adjustment programs dramatically underscored the fragile social and economic foundations of post-independence leaders’ claims to national unity as growing numbers, not necessarily identified along ethnic lines, remained excluded from vital social provisions. The postcolonial call to nation-building had contained differences among socioeconomic interests for more than a decade, but now the searing gap between people’s aspirations for actual freedom and the grim reality of a hollowed out national sovereignty could find new radical expressions in collective mobilization. It is only at this late stage that something vaguely approaching what academic specialists call “social movements” makes its appearance throughout Africa. Yet, as the introduction suggested, the cultural, ideological, and spiritual influences of earlier anticOLONIAL and postcolonial conflicts as well as the specificity and complexity of African collective practices still make African opposition to neoliberalism largely illegible through “social movement” as an abstract conceptual lens.

Protests against structural adjustment exploded between the 1980s and the 1990s. Scholars used the expression “IMF riots” to characterize their grievances in coherent terms. In Tunisia, Sudan, and Morocco, rebellions erupted against the abolition of food subsidies. In Liberia, Niger, and Madagascar, they targeted cuts in public sector wages and employment. Economic collapse in Côte d’Ivoire, once revered by development experts as a success story in African capitalism, brought students and workers to the streets in February 1990, decrying governmental corruption as well as electricity cutoffs. In some cases, such as Zambia in 1991, mobilizations against austerity and worsening living conditions, in which workers took a leading role, did actually propel the pro-democracy movement, although regimes put in power through democratic elections quickly confirmed their commitment to implementing neoliberal restructuring.47

Africa’s structural adjustment validated the violent logic of anti-Black raciality insofar it assumed the neoliberal “Washington consensus” as the pathway to development for populations that, in their daily material lives, were made disposable on a massive scale. A similar logic was at work in the concept—“civil society”—that rose to prominence in academic analyses of Africa’s pro-democracy and anti-austerity movements. The liberal praise of “civil society” was a prescriptive framework that castigated as dysfunctional to democratic stability any collective expression of claims and grievances refusing to be
confined to a politically moderate influence on the institutional or electoral arena. Consequently, radical critiques of capitalism and neoliberalism as well as militant direct action were demonized so that, in the funding policies of Western aid providers and NGOs, support for African civil society acquired a strategic functionality akin to counterinsurgency. Yet, “civil society” proved no more adequate than “social movements” as an explanatory tool for African practices evolving along increasingly indistinct boundaries between survival, mobilization, and collective action. Cameroonian political theorist, Basile Ndjio, observed that—amid generalized disillusionment with the fading promises of independence and remote prospects for revolutionary change or Pan-African solidarity—African urban youth ordinarily respond to state violence and neoliberal austerity through “popular practices of insubordination and impoliteness,” including the desecration of monumental places and a deliberately excessive public display of sexuality and bodily eroticism. It would be, however, a mistake, Ndjio continues, to merely see in these expressions an apolitical “safety valve” for cynicism and hopelessness. They are rather a collective and sensual embrace of indiscipline and indocility explicitly mocking grotesque calls to order by authoritarian states. Although defying any categorization and representation in terms of social movement, such practices, known in Cameroon as “carrefours de la joie” (“crossroads of joy”) are nonetheless perceived—on account of their elusiveness and lack of political demands, which limit possibilities of cooptation—as highly subversive by ruling elites.

Even when it is gathered around collective claims and grievances, African mobilization politics is hardly legible as a “social movement” sphere distinct from either the state or the micropolitics of survival. Struggles for land and resources in the oil-rich Niger Delta have articulated a radical critique, often backed by armed militancy, of multinational corporations and environmental destruction. Yet they maintain a range of ambivalent relations with local officials, especially as these demand their own access to resources vis-à-vis the central government. It is not surprising, Michael Watts writes, that experts aligned with the Washington consensus resort to racist stereotypes such as “American gangland” to depict insurgencies like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).

Such experiences are in fact far more in line with a long and glorious global history of Black self-defense and self-determination, also demonized as “gang-like” in the US, rather than the self-policing invited by the notion of “civil society.” The Niger Delta can be taken as an example of the renewed vulnerability facing African multitudes, by now mostly living in precarious conditions and without stable income prospects within urban areas, while corporate land grabs are ravaging vast rural territories that, in a renewed global scramble for resources, have attracted the attention of emerging powers, such as China, India, Brazil, or Turkey. Yet, nationwide landless peoples’ movements along Latin American lines have rarely emerged in Africa, despite the state’s complicity with global investors. Prospects for African rural movements have been hampered by governmental cooptation, personalized populist politics, the moderating influence of NGO funding, or ethnic divisions. Deeper reasons for the evanescence of land-based social movements in Africa are to be found in the lack of a clear class differentiation between landless and landholding groups, since traditional and often overlapping claims on agricultural, forest, or grazing land are sustained by localized systems of moral economy of which the state can be contradictorily portrayed as the ideal defender and the practical violator. Large-scale land occupation movements are confined to specific realities (Zimbabwe being the most notorious) produced by the harshest forms of settler colonialism and white supremacy. Opposition to corporate incursions in land grabs’ flashpoints like Madagascar, Uganda, or Ethiopia, however, has shown a more ambiguous pattern of confrontation,
constantly oscillating from direct action to constitutional legalism and appeals to politicians’
benevolence.\textsuperscript{51}

African workers and women have been hit particularly hard by structural adjustment. Labor
movements that once heavily depended on the state for both their rank-and-file among public employees and institutional protection and incorporation have been generally
decimated. The increasingly volatile connection between African urban residents and the world
of production is evident in the vast outnumbering of the unionized or unionizable working class by those eking out a living in the informal sector. Scholars have proposed
“social movement unionism”—or alliances between workers and a range of other marginal-
ized sectors—as a way out of the crisis of the labor movement. Yet, the precarity of self-employed workers is not merely a sign of vulnerability, but also reflects long-standing
_critiques of wage labor discipline and insubordination against productivist dictates that in
Africa have never really broken with colonial and anti-Black ideologies.\textsuperscript{52} When not
engaged in practices of excessive consumption, popular illegalities, and impolite disregard for
order, to recall Ndjio’s analysis, the self-employed may well find avenues for collective
mobilization that starkly depart from the ethos of the working class. Paul Lubeck has thus
documented how Northern Nigerian labor constituencies ravaged by structural adjustment
found a more attractive ethical worldview and social practice in political Islam, which in
West Africa has emerged as an arena where multiple religious identities and ideologies are
 contesting the allegiance of the disenfranchised and disillusioned.\textsuperscript{53} In addition to shrinking
economic opportunities, austerity has brought African women the intersecting burdens of
increasingly assertive patriarchal authority—especially as men left jobless by restructuring
have moved into traditionally female market occupations, or, in rural areas, have exerted
a more stringent control on income from export agriculture—and reduced support from
state-provided health and welfare services. African women’s responses to such simultaneous
oppression has, to some extent, consisted in advancing forms of—primarily middle-
_class—feminism geared to rights and recognition. However, more widespread has been the
reclamation of the centrality of women’s suffering and strategies across a range of struggles
that cannot be simply identified in gender terms. Thus mobilizations to defend communities’
access to the land against the predatory and racist incursions of corporate capital have been
decisively inspired and energized by African women’s assertion of leadership roles based on
traditional moral authority, place-specific historical memories of women’s struggles against
white rule, and spiritual imageries centering connections between motherhood and the aver-
sion to capitalism of the earth’s reproductive and community-nurturing powers.\textsuperscript{54}

**Conclusion**

In the study of Africa’s contentious politics, the expression “social movement” obscures
much more than it enlightens. That has a lot to do with the fact that, in the historical
trajectory from colonial rule to neocolonial independence to neoliberal austerity, the
“political” has recursively stood to African social and cultural practices in a relationship
of violence and terror, “haunted” by the anti-Blackness pervading institutional dispensa-
tions, development policies, and visions of order, stability, and governability. Far from
enjoying access to avenues for the counter-hegemonic contestation of power—to which
social movement studies gesture—ordinary Africans’ lives have rather “insisted” in the
global afterlife of slavery and the endless “wake” of the Middle Passage.\textsuperscript{55} It is, if any-
thing, a sign of the optical distortion generated by the concept “African social move-
ments” that the overwhelming majority of recent studies on this topic are limited to

\textsuperscript{366}
the one country, South Africa, where social movements have been most explicitly theorized and invoked as a “project.” A literature too vast to be summarized in this limited space has then conferred the “social movement” mantle to provide political coherence to a host of mobilizations over the delivery of water and electricity, resistance to shack dwellers’ evictions, access to HIV treatment, and the refusal of privatization. But, elsewhere, African social practices of insurgency, insubordination, or just impoliteness have been refractory to the legibility demanded by social movement theory and activism.

A notion that neoliberalism appeared to have kicked to the curb—revolution—has instead been unexpectedly resurrected by the events in Egypt and Tunisia in the early 2010s, echoed by insurrections in Algeria and Sudan at the time of this writing. As a prospect, revolution remains, nonetheless, exposed to the complexities and ambivalences broadly summarized in this chapter, and one can hardly discern the emergence of either self-conscious subjectivities or ideological frameworks that can sustain visions of revolutionary redemption. As for the core theme of this volume, Panafrikanism, if there is a Pan-African dimension in post-structural adjustment struggles, perhaps it is not to be found in the continental gatherings—such as mobilizations for the World Conference Against Racism in Durban (2001), the World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (2002), or the World Social Forum in Nairobi (2007)—that sometimes evoke or merely allude to such ideological lineages. High-profile activist events have, if anything, been criticized for their middle-class elitism and unaccountable platforming of well-heeled professional activists distant from the quotidian existence of communities they claim to represent. What is Pan-African about current African struggles is less about explicit ideologies or supra-national organizing than the objective sameness—at the structural and ontological, rather than contingent and experiential, level—of the enemies these struggles face. The questions raised by the mobilizations discussed here have a power that consists, as Fanon explained, in their speaking to a global Black refusal of the anti-Black world. As such, African claims resonate with Black lives equally positioned as targets of the gratuitous violence of civil society in Flint, Detroit, New Orleans, Rio de Janeiro, Kingston, or Lampedusa. What comes in the wake of such encounters between Panafrikanism and Black antagonism will be a matter of praxis as well as analysis.

Notes
1 See, for example, Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, eds. The Social Movement Reader: Cases and Concepts (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015); Harry E. Vanden, Peter F. Funke, and Gary Prevost, eds. The New Global Politics: Global Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); Berch Berberoglu, ed. The Palgrave Handbook of Social Movements, Revolution, and Social Transformation (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019).

7 Mamadou Diouf, Political Liberalisation or Democratic Transition: African Perspectives (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1998), 20.

8 Cit. in Diouf, Political Liberalisation, 21.

9 Ibid.

10 Diouf, Political Liberalisation, 20.


19 Wynter, “No Humans Involved.”


31 Ibid., 34–38.


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38 Mamdani, Citizen and Subject.
43 Becker, “Power to the People”.
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