

AFRICA'S REVOLUTIONARY CENTURY²

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Emancipation from a racist world?

We live in a racist world. Despite the collapse of European empire and the formal adoption of a façade of international bureaucracy, the vast majority of black Africans are still waiting for meaningful emancipation from their perceived social inferiority. Until recently there was much talk of economic growth in Africa. In the present decade, 7 out of the 10 fastest-growing economies (as conventionally measured) have been African. But the current global economic slowdown has already cast doubt on the durability of this growth. What is indisputable is that Africa's population will multiply rapidly in the twenty-first century and, even without an economic miracle, all these extra people will have more to spend.

In 1900 Africa was the least densely populated and urbanized continent, with 7.5% of the world's total population. Today it accounts for double that, with an urban share fast approaching the global average. According to UN projections, Africa will be home to 25% of all the people alive in 2050; 40% in 2100 (when Asia will contribute 42% and the rest 18%). This is because Africa's annual population growth rate is 2.5% while the rest of the world is ageing and its share is in decline. The Asian manufacturing countries already recognize that Africa is the fastest-growing market in the world. This might provide an opportunity for Africans to play a stronger hand in international negotiations affecting their interests. If they succeed in standing up for themselves, it would be a world revolution – the end of the racist world order, no less.

The movement to abolish slavery was officially completed in the late nineteenth century. But emancipation is rarely as simple as that. In West Africa, abolition was a disaster. The internal drive to capture slaves continued regardless and, despite a shift in their use to domestic production, supply soon exceeded demand. The price of slaves fell drastically, leading to their widespread abuse. Colonial empires were then justified by the consequent disorder in West

Africa and by the drive to abolish the Arab slave trade in East Africa. Much later, when colonial regimes fell, Africans were promised emancipation once more, this time through national independence. Most African economies then regressed for a half-century. Apartheid was defeated in South Africa, but two decades later the country is no less unequal and unemployment is rampant. Africans are still waiting for equal membership of world society. But they have never encountered more favourable conditions than in the century to come.

In the twentieth century, a population explosion was accompanied by a jump in Africa's urban share from under 2% of the population to almost half. This urban revolution is not just a proliferation of cities, but also entails installing the whole package of pre-industrial class society: states, urban elites, intensification of agriculture, and a political economy based on the city bazaar and extraction of rural surpluses.

The anti-colonial revolution unleashed hopes for transformation of an unequal world. These have not yet been realized for most Africans. Africa's new leaders thought they were building modern economies, but in reality they were erecting fragile states based on the same small-scale agriculture as before. Either machine production in some sectors would generate economic growth, or the state would devolve to a level compatible with its low productivity base. This structural weakness inevitably led most countries to exchange the democratic legitimacy of the independence struggle for the dependence of autocratic rulers on foreign powers. Life support to Africa's new ruling elites was switched off in the early 1980s with the coming of the neoliberal order. Many governments were made bankrupt and some countries collapsed into civil war.

The growth of cities should normally lead to rural-urban exchange, as farmers supply food to city-dwellers and in turn buy the latter's manufactures and services. But this progressive division of labour requires a measure of protection from the world market, and it was stifled at birth in post-colonial Africa by the dumping of subsidized food from the tax-rich West, and later of cheap Asian manufactures. 'Structural adjustment programmes' imposed by the World Bank and IMF meant that Africa's fledgling national economies had no protection. Tax collection in Africa was never as regular as in Eurasia, and governments still rely on whatever they can extract from mineral royalties and the import-

² This argument has been made public in several forms and at various lengths. It is currently being developed as a book, *Africa's Coming Revolution*.

export trade. Rents secured by political privilege are the chief source of wealth. *This constitutes an Old Regime ripe for liberal revolution.*

African development in the 21st century

Development refers first of all to humanity's hectic dash from the countryside to the city since 1800. The engine driving this economic growth is usually assumed to be *capitalism*. Development then means trying to understand how capitalist growth is generated and how to make good the damage it causes in repeated cycles of creation and destruction. A third meaning refers to the *developmental states* of the mid-twentieth century, the idea that governments are best placed to engineer sustained economic growth with redistribution. The most common usage, however, refers to the commitment of rich countries after decolonization to helping poor countries become richer. This was at first real enough, even if the means chosen were often flawed. But after the 1970s, it has faded. If the rapid growth of the world economy in the decades after the Second World War encouraged a belief that poor countries could become rich, since the 1980s 'development' has meant securing the free global movement of capital and administering minor palliatives to the wounds inflicted. *Development* is the label for political relations between rich and poor countries after colonial empire.

There are two pressing features of our world: the unprecedented expansion of markets since the Second World War, and massive economic inequality between (and within) nations. Becoming closer and more unequal at the same time is a recipe for disaster. Africa, with one-seventh of the world's population, had 2% of global purchasing power around the Millennium. What could Africa's new urban populations produce for the world economy? Apart from exporting raw materials, when they could, the world market for food and other agricultural products is skewed by Western farm subsidies. Manufactures face intense competition from Asia. African countries should argue collectively in the councils of world trade for protection from international dumping, so that their farmers and infant industries might supply their own populations first, and endogenous development would have a chance.

Exchange between cities and their hinterlands has been frustrated for post-colonial Africa, whose bargaining position is undermined by its being fragmented into 54 states. The fastest-growing sector of world trade is the production of culture: entertainment, education, media,

sports, software, and information services. The terrain is less rigidly fixed here than in agriculture and manufactures, and Africans start with the advantage of a proven global preference for their music, films, and plastic arts.

Classes for and against a liberal revolution

The classical liberal revolutions were sustained by three ideas: that freedom and economic progress require increased movement of people, goods and money in the *market*; that the political framework most compatible with this is *democracy*; and that social progress depends on *science*, the drive to know how things really work. The energies generated by Africa's urban revolution are already manifested in economy, technology, religion and the arts; and they could be harnessed to radical change if freed from the Old Regime of presidential kleptocracy.

Rousseau's condemnation of eighteenth-century France rings just as true for our world: 'It is manifestly contrary to the law of nature, however defined... that a handful of people should gorge themselves with superfluities while the hungry multitude goes in want of necessities'. The institutions of agrarian civilization are alive and well – and not just in post-colonial Africa. Rent-seeking is on the rise in the old capitalist countries too. The greatest riches are no longer acquired through the selling of products cheaper than those of one's competitors; rents secured by political privilege – such as Big Pharma's income from patents, monopoly revenues from DVDs, and tax revenues used to bail out the Wall Street banks – sustain the super-rich today in a world where the top 65 billionaires own as much as half the people alive.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon provides a blueprint for a class analysis of decadent societies ripe for revolution. Political parties and unions were weak and conservative in late colonial Africa, representing only a tiny part of the population: the industrial workers, civil servants, intellectuals, and shopkeepers of the towns, classes unwilling to jeopardize their own privileges. They were hostile to and suspicious of the mass of country people. The latter had customary chiefs supervised by the military and administrative officials of the occupying power. A nationalist middle class of professionals and traders confronted the superstition and feudalism of traditional authorities. Landless peasants joined the urban rabble. Eventually colonial repression forced the nationalists to flee the towns and to take refuge with the peasantry. Only then, with the rural-urban divide temporary-

ly healed by crisis, did a mass movement take off. Fanon's method offers guidance as to how to identify the potential for another African revolution.

Clearly, trade and finance are not organized, in Africa or the world at large, with a view to generating a popular movement. A liberal revolution would need allies with significant wealth and power. Africans will have to develop their own transnational associations to combat the huge coalitions that would deny them self-expression. One of the strongest political movements today is the formation of large regional trading blocs in response to neoliberal globalization. A national framework for development never made sense in Africa and it makes even less sense today. The coming revolution could leapfrog many of the obstacles in its path, but not if African societies still wear the national straitjacket they inherited from colonial rule.

Freedom and protection in the early modern revolutions

The American, French, and Italian revolutions all combined mass insurgency with an extended period of warfare focused on removing fragmented sovereignty, unfair taxes, and restrictions placed on movement and trade; German unification had a similar focus, but is less straightforwardly described as 'liberal'. The success of the British in establishing a global free trade regime in the nineteenth century and the revival of free trade as economic orthodoxy today have obscured the complex dialectic of freedom and protection whose imperatives were laid out by Sir James Steuart in *Principles of Political Economy* (1767). The first imperative was for impediments to trade caused by divided sovereignty within and between states to be overcome. Development under these circumstances depended on removing these barriers to trade. At the same time, these incipient free trade areas needed a measure of protection, so that their own agriculture and manufactures could benefit from supplying newly consolidated home markets. The French revolution is a striking case in point.

In 1793, the Terror was unleashed and the Bretons raised a 'Royal and Catholic Army' against which the revolutionary Republic raised an army to fight in what became known as the War of Vendée. Nantes, France's largest port, was heavily involved in slavery and trade with the Caribbean. It stood out for the Republic and was besieged by the Royalist army as a result. The ensuing battle was decisive for the Revolu-

tion; the shippers financed the Republican army. Why did the Nantes bourgeoisie risk so much for the Revolution? France, although a central monarchy, was then a patchwork of local fief-holders, each of whom exacted what they could from people and goods moving through their territory. The Republic promised to end all that and establish a regulated home market. The Nantes shippers wanted to reduce the costs of moving their trade goods inland and so they allied themselves with the Republic. Needless to say, the revolutionaries lacked the means to fund an army.

In the United States, American and Dutch smugglers led resistance to the East India Company's tea monopoly and to British taxes offsetting the crown's military costs. The Italian *Risorgimento* too was backed financially by the industrialists of Milan and Turin, who wanted a less fragmented home market with unrestricted access to world trade. In all three cases, the power of merchant and manufacturing capital played a decisive part in the revolution.

Long before the European Common Market became the European Union, the Prussian *Zollverein* (customs union) was launched in 1818 and culminated in the German empire in 1871. In each case political unification was preceded by a customs union lasting half a century. The *Zollverein* was a piecemeal attempt to harmonise tariffs, measures, and economic policy in scattered territories controlled by the Prussian ruling family. The Germans felt vulnerable to British and French power because of their own extreme political fragmentation (some 40 states in 1815, more later). Prussia's main aim was to develop a protected zone of internal free trade from which the Austrians were excluded. By the 1860s, most of what soon became Germany had joined the customs union. Their leading economist, Friedrich List, proposed a 'national system' of political economy. He emphasized the scope for innovation within an expanded free trade area protected from the world market. Similar proposals were espoused by Americans like Alexander Hamilton and Henry Clay.

Towards greater integration of African trade

President Mbeki's idea of an 'African renaissance' expressed the belief that a black majority government in South Africa might be a catalyst for an African economic revival based on greater political coordination between what had so far been easy pickings for the world's great powers. His initiative was aimed exclusively at the very political class that had failed Africa so

often since independence. He did not factor civil society movements or mass mobilisation into his plans.

Africa currently consists of a labyrinthine confusion of regional associations which do little to strengthen their members' bargaining power in world markets. On the ground, however, African peoples maintain patterns of long-distance movement and exchange developed over centuries, despite their current rulers' attempts to force economy and society into national cages. This is one reason why so much of the African economy is held to be 'informal': state regulations are routinely ignored by most people, so that half of the population and most economic activities are criminalized and an absurd public effort is wasted on trying to apply unenforceable rules. Classical liberalism offers an answer to this chaos – aiming for the widest area possible for free trade and movement with minimal regulation by the authorities. Neoliberal globalization has done much to discredit this recipe, since political initiatives, even in pursuit of local free trade, are anathema. Yet the policy conclusion is inescapable: the boundaries of free

commerce *and* of state intervention should be pushed beyond the limits of existing sovereignties.

China occupied a similar slot to Africa in Western consciousness not long ago. In the 1930s, people often spoke of the Chinese as they do of Africa today. China was then crippled by the violence of warlords, its peasants mired in the worst poverty imaginable. Today the country is an economic superpower. This profound shift in power from West to East does not guarantee that Africa will escape soon from the stigma of inferiority, but the structures of North Atlantic dominance that once seemed inevitable are perceptibly in decline; and that makes it easier to envisage change. Humanity is entering a new era of social possibility. Africans' drive for emancipation from an unequal world society affects all of us. In that sense an African revolution would be a world revolution.