Book Review: Africa Uprising


by

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Preliminary Remarks


These young Tunisian Boat People have not only (re-)started the big migration movements which culminated in 2015, but they also induced the break-down of the European border regime which had been reinforced during the years before.

The cooperation of the Ben Ali Regime (like Gaddafi, in his very last years) with European fortress politics was one of the drivers of discontent in Tunisia in 2010, since the desire for emigration had been restrained by repressive means. The revolution removed these obstacles.\(^2\) Dietrich, Helmut (2011): Die tunesische Revolte als Fanal: Kommentar und Chronik (17. Dezember 2010-14. Januar 2011) https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/receive/duepublico_mods_00024864

Knowing the role of the military and police repressions and all the sufferings related to this, which followed the Arab Revolution, it does not seem to be wise to subsume the migration movements of 2015 under a header of „revolutionary departure“\(^\) . Also, one might argue, the revolutionary spirit is being drowned in the Med. Still, the Arab Revolution gave way for new discussions about the relationship between uprisings and migrations. The old thinking of „Exit or Voice“, either revolution or emigration, was definitely out. Discussions about migration networks, diaspora communities, and African cosmopolitanism, which
had started in the 1990s, were animated by the migration movements. Also, the
links between people on the move and European activists gained momentum.
“Freedom! Not Frontex” was a common demand from both sides of the
Eindrücke und Fragmente einer Delegationsreise im Mai 2011,
pdf
10 years later, in 2020, there were again some ten thousand young men
crossing over from Tunisia, and the Algerian Harraga is another proof that
uprisings and migrations are strongly connected.⁴https://migration-control.info/en/wiki/algeria/

These preliminary remarks seem to be necessary before introducing the book
“Africa Uprising”, in which migration has not been adequately addressed.
However, the familiar and peer-group networks, the departure from paternalist
traditions, and the call for alternative life perspectives are at the same time the
basis of protests in African cities and for the departures of the people on the
move. Migrations are continuations of every-day-struggles. “Africa Uprising” not
only describes the wave of unrest which, in parallel with the Arab Revolution,
occurred on the whole continent, but it indirectly describes the grounds of future
migration movements.

About the Book

Against the background of the revolution in Sudan, the continuing demonstrations
in Algeria, the recent protests in Nigeria and unrest in several African countries,
it is definitely worthwhile to take a look at this book, even though it has already
been published in 2015. It is worthwhile for several reasons:

1. Between 2005 and 2011, there was a wave of protests in many parts of
Africa, which were overlaid by the „Arab Revolution“, and often overlooked
entirely. Branch and Mampilly (B&M) count more than 100 protests during this
period. There is an Africa Uprising, which, from the European perspective, has
mostly been perceived only superficially, if at all. The change of perception
from the so-called Africa Optimism, speaking about „Africa Rising“, towards an
alternative optimism, namely towards „Africa Uprising“ has proofed to be
sustainable also for the years 2019 and 2020.
2. B&M explicitly refer to Fanon and thus to a radical anti-colonialism that is currently reviving in some places. An uncompromising approach like this is needed to find ways out of the entanglements of Africa’s post-colonial setting: against global capital, against the violence and terror of post-colonial regimes, against the dominance of external actors and also against the humanitarian imperialism of agencies and NGOs.

3. The authors describe the ruptures and differences between the civil society and the protest forms of the urban popular classes. In this context, they speak of a “Political Society” – a term that will be discussed later – and thus provide us with a tool to better understand riots, conflicts, and uprisings in African cities and to relate to them in a better informed way, and also to know about their immanent contradictions.

4. B&M have consistently focused not only on the ethnic lines of division, but also on the often conflicting interests of urban and rural populations: a contrast that has never been resolved in the “national”, and which has become even more important for the analysis of post-colonial states and regimes in recent years, as many conflicts and expulsions have become even more acute in times of climate change, extractive economies, agribusiness and military interventions.

5. The book offers rich information about the role of agencies and NGOs in African conflicts, and it invites the numerous actors* to reflect on their positions.


B&M work as professors of political science at US-American universities, with experience at universities in Tanzania and Uganda respectively. They also drew insights from interviews with emigrants from Nigeria and Sudan. Their book is divided into a “theoretical“ part, chapters 2-4, and a part with four case studies about Nigeria, Uganda Ethiopia, and Sudan in chapters 5-8.
Part 1:

B&M start by pointing out that the propaganda of „Africa Rising“ and the „Africa Optimism“ of the early 21st century has left behind the majority of the African population. The people who belong to the often-quoted „new African middle class“ mostly earn less than 2 dollars a day. Almost half of all Africans* live in extreme poverty (and the modest improvements of the last ten years are just being neutralised in the post-Corona world order). The authors suggest a change of focus: from „Africa Rising“ to „Africa Uprising“.

Indeed, Africa has been largely ignored within the conversation over today’s global protest wave. This silence derives in part from long-standing Western images of Africa as too rural, too traditional, and too bound by ethnicity for modern political protest to arise. Such prejudices also mean that those few African protests that do make it into the international press tend to be dismissed as riots or looting. Violence is often seen as the sole driver of political change in Africa by media fixated on warlords, child soldiers, and humanitarian intervention. Even when popular protest on the African continent is deemed politically momentous, as it was in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, it is turned into an Arab Spring, divorced from its geographical location, with analysts asking whether Africa might ‘follow’ with an awakening of its own . (p. 12)

This description of 2015 applies to 2020 in more or less the same way: the usual narratives continue to fade out black African history (p. 13):

Today’s uprisings build on a history of African protest that stretches back to the anti-colonial struggle, a legacy that has survived despite overwhelming odds. This book seeks to place protest in Africa within the broader debate about today’s outbreak of protest around the world – but it does so by discerning what makes that protest specifically African.” (p. 14)

– without romanticizing it, narrating it from the description of the concrete power relations and in knowledge of the „long histories of protest throughout Africa“. 6 One of the most important sources of this historical access: Frederick Cooper (2002), Africa since 1940. The Past of the Present, Cambridge
For these struggles, the Sahara is not an impermeable border, as B&M write. (p. 15) However, what they forget to mention is that this fact is based on trans-Saharan migrations (just as they largely ignore the migration issues in general, apart from rural-urban migration). This is a deficit, just as the fact that they don’t consider gender differences. However, the authors are right not only to look at the superficially visible changes and successes, (p. 16) but rather at the more profound changes in „self-realisation“, new forms of democracy and development „with popular interests first“. (p. 17) They are interested in basic structures and imaginations that develop out of everyday life and struggles. This is, as we see it, going into the right direction. Unfortunately, these basic structures appear only very selectively in the following chapters of the book and the case studies are not really rich in this respect.

As Frantz Fanon writes in The Wretched of the Earth, „the colonial world is a world divided into compartments“. Starting from this observation and referring to the three great historical waves of African protest: the anti-colonial movements, the anti-austerity struggles of the late 1980s and early 1900s and the post-Seattle social movements, the authors describe that the main actors – the political and economic elites in the cities, the working class, the popular class and the rural population – recur in each of the three waves of protest, and that throughout this history, the protests of the population have repeatedly encountered two permanent political dilemmas: How can political rifts within the city be overcome and how can the political divide between the city and the countryside be bridged? (p. 19)

Also, what about the protests is „specifically African“? There are no models to be imported and no prejudices to be made about what protest should “properly” look like. B&M see the role of a „civil society“ and its non-violent forms of mobilisation, as well as the „social movements“, with their forms of organisation and demands, as imports from the West. On the forms of self-organisation in the Arab world, see in particular Asef Bayat, Life as Politics, Stanford 2011. Unfortunately, B&M were apparently unaware of this book. A discussion of Bayat’s views against the background of sub-Saharan insurgency movements would greatly enrich B&M’s arguments. They adopt the term „political society“ from Chatterjee (2011), who speaks of the „Politics of the Governed“. Chatterjee, P. (2004) The politics of the governed: popular politics in most of the world. New York: Columbia University Press The experiences from India fit the bill. The life of
the urban popular classes is fundamentally shaped by colonial constraints – and by those of post-colonial state power. Colonial violence, as Fanon argues, forms a political identity. If civil society is concerned with reforms, rights and a somewhat more secure place in the emerging post-colonial society, “political society” is more concerned with an immediate transformation of living conditions in the face of the constraints of an arbitrary and violent state power.

B&Ms describe the emergence of the „dangerous classes“, which are a constant factor in colonial cities after the Second World War. At any time their stay in the city could be declared illegal, their settlements could be demolished. Colonial regimes relied increasingly on militarised police forces, equipped with armoured vehicles and the full range of equipment to control unrest, to maintain the imposed order – a picture that is still familiar in many African cities today. (S.27) The combination of state neglect and violence, informality and illegality determined all aspects of urban life – work, livelihood, housing, social relations, culture and, of course, politics. (S.29)

In chapter 2, B&M describe Nkrumah’s populist and non-violent path in Ghana, which succeeded in involving the “political society” in a national project, and they quote Fanon’s criticism. (p.39) Chapter 3 deals with the anti-austerity protests of the 1980s and early 1990s, which unfolded in two-thirds of all African states after the development regimes of the 1960s and 1970s had been deprived of resources everywhere. Benin (1989) „came to be seen as the paradigm for this wave of political transformation“. (p. 47) Spontaneous protests intermingled with demands that were met in a multi-party system and by a technocratic government. Within a short period of time, this transformed into a dictatorial regime. Summarizing, B&M write on p. 55:

From Benin onwards, multiparty democracy provided the rallying cry for the second wave of protest movements throughout Africa. However, liberal slogans and agendas were often little more than the vehicles for efforts by political elites, labour, NGOs, and students to halt the neoliberal dismantling of developmental states and to regain the relative privilege they had enjoyed. Political parties, often created and led by insider elites, were one instrument through which these groups sought to advance their interests using the language of democratization. Opposition parties mobilized mass constituencies to take to the streets around demands for fundamental political change. They used popular protests to force the state into liberal reform and then stepped in
During the Development Decade, urban civil society, including the formed labour movement, had become closely intertwined with the state leadership. Protests against austerity and „structural adjustment“ were now the playground of trade unions seeking to prevent the social decline of their members, and of students, who differentiated between those moving up and those moving down, and NGOs, who delivered the slogans of democratisation along Western lines.

The „revolution of expectations“ had drawn more and more people from the countryside to the cities during the Development Decade. The social and the legal status of the people in the slums had hardly changed compared to colonial times – except that they were now much more numerous. The „political society“ continued to be defined as extra-legal or illegal; it was subject to alternating neglect and outbreaks of state violence. The destruction of squatter settlements, for example, was a common occurrence. A 1970 clean-up campaign in Nairobi made 50,000 people homeless, the Ivorian government destroyed the homes of 20 percent of the population of Abidjan between 1969 and 1973, and in Dakar, entire neighbourhoods were bulldozed.

B&M discuss the role of the „political society“ in the uprisings, on the one hand as „bargaining by riot“ B&M do not use this term, as they avoid any reference at all to (European) social historiography. Still, like “moral economy”, this is one of the terms which might prove to be productive also from an African perspective. (p.57) and as a search for livelihood and patronage systems, and on the other hand as a rejection and defence against state violations.

Some political society protesters may have been seeking to establish patronage relations with rising opposition political parties as the chances for securing benefits from cash-strapped sitting governments fell away. But others took to the streets not to forge new relations with state agents, but to push back the state, establish alternative orders outside the state’s purview, or overthrow the whole system and all its parts ... indeed, they may only have been defending their autonomy. ... Democracy may mean ‘subverting, bypassing, and/or even openly attacking the state’ and not reforming its institutions or distribution networks. And Fanon has already provided a theorization of the popular
The focus of the book turns from multi-party democratisation to the informal networks that have often been formed in the survival structures of the slums, sometimes emerging from short-term political movements, and occasionally forming short-term alliances with opposition leaders. In their „permanent state of waiting“, slum dwellers have become alienated from national rhetoric and have formed their own subliminal networks. B&Ms warn us not to romanticise these structures, which are characterised by poverty, precariousness and repression. Change and hope, anger and destruction are often close together. However, the literature which B&M cite on p. 58 f. only represents a very first approach to this important topic! A very insightful example is the study by M. Diouf (1996) on Dakar, which they quote extensively.\textsuperscript{10}Diouf, M. (1996), Urban Youth and Senegalese Politics: Dakar 1988 – 1994, in:Public Culture 8 (2): 225 - 49 Also the writing by M. Di Nuncio (2012) on Addis Ababa has to be mentioned in this context.\textsuperscript{11}Di Nuncio, M. (2012) „We are good at surviving“: street hustling in Addis Ababa’s inner city, Urban Forum 23(4), 433-47

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\caption{African protests by year, 2005-14}
\end{figure}

In chapter 4, B&M turn to the third wave of protests of the years 2005 onwards. The list of protests involving the Political Society is heterogeneous and long. There are local protests, but also broad uprisings.

At many points in these protests the division between civil society and “political society” could be overcome (p. 84), but nowhere was there a common political
ideology or programme. What the protesters had in common was their experience of economic deprivation and state violence. The lowest common denominator was anti-corruption, which has since then been part of every change of government, and the fight against incumbents who cannot be voted out of office. In these struggles, new ways, new alliances are being found. In the meantime, in 2019 and 2020, these negative demands have become generalised and radicalised by informal networks of resistance, like in Algeria: All Must Go, the whole regime, the whole system must go.

B&M examine the political development of the elites since the 1990s, which is characterised by instability and privatisation of money flows. „Choiceless democracies“ emerged, and globalised elites who entrench themselves in gated communities. Meanwhile, the intellectual middle classes are pushing their way into NGOs and agencies, as they find no other way to secure their livelihoods than from foreign aid funds. They are not the agents of protests – except for orderly demos calling for international protocols, peace and human rights. International donors’ funds promote the alienation of NGO elites from the urban and rural poor. The “political society” becomes the object of social and WFP programmes. This, of course, much more concerns the rural lower classes, and the displaced crowds who are no longer the reproductive base of resistance, as Fanon visualized them to be. and the states are glad to delegate social spending to NGOs, and international agencies.

Part 2:

The case studies in the second part of the book (chapters 5 to 8) each deal with the interaction and opposition of civil society and „political society“. However, in this book mostly we search in vain for references to the material elements of political society’s self-organization. The most likely place to find them is in Chapter 7 on the protests in Ethiopia in 2005 (pp. 153 ff.), as mentioned above, thanks to an anthropologist’s work by Di Nunzio (2012).

The „passive networks“ that already existed among young people and poor city dwellers were activated to bring people to the protests and hide those who had to flee from persecution by the police. While text messaging played an important role among students and professionals, there is little evidence that such technologies were necessary for the mass of protesters. ...
The protest was based on the often invisible networks that held the dense, poorer neighbourhoods closely together. In this way, the protest gained its significance from the political imagination of the people from which it broke out, rather than from liberal ideas about what a real protest should look like. Violence was a demonstration of political capacity to act, a direct attempt to wrest the ground from state power, within the framework of a „moral economy“ of the street and by people who were criminalised as „dangerous hooligans“. (p. 158)

From today’s perspective, Chapter 5 on Occupy Nigeria, and Chapter 8 on Sudanese Unfinished Uprisings deserve special interest. The chapter on Nigeria not only reconstructs the internal debates of the protest movement, on the basis of interviews, but also the use of Boko Haram as an argument for disciplining the protests. Boko Haram itself is described as an expression of the non-simultaneity of rural protests (p.106), before this movement was „denatured“ to become a jihadist terror organization under the blows of repression.

On Nigeria, I would like to add an excerpt from a recent article in the Guardian, which adds a topical point to the dimensions of this book: the reference to „letting live“, which is becoming increasingly important in the global context of BLM and the construction of „overpopulations“. Under the title „Just Stop Killing Us“, Emmanuel Akinwotu from Lagos reports on groups from the civil society who are supporting the protests of the political society:

The shock of the murders has shaken the protest movement. The 24-hour curfews introduced by many states are slowly being lifted, but they have effectively brought the protests to a standstill. Nevertheless, the anger is smouldering and could trigger new demonstrations.

The protests have given a younger generation, frustrated by poor governance in Africa’s most populous country, a sense of new opportunities. They have created an ecosystem of support groups that coordinate aid and provide logistics nationwide.

The Feminist Coalition, a group of young women and the End SARS Response Team were just two such groups. They set up telephone lines for protesters, provided medical care for the injured and organised ambulances and private security services at protests across the country.

For Ariet Honest, a 23-year-old artist and model, the march to end SARS was
her first protest ... „It is inspiring to see our power, our unity,“ she said, „We don’t even ask much of them. Just stop killing and harassing us, that’s all.\textsuperscript{13} https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/24/just-stop-killing-us-young-nigerians-rise-up-against-brutal-police-force

**Chapter 8, on Sudan** is also based on interviews with activists\textsuperscript{*}.\textsuperscript{14} Of course, such interviews lead to a bias. After all, the rebellious young people do not give interviews. B&M describe the 1985 uprising, then the student mobilisations of 2010 to 2012, before floods and the cancellation of fuel subsidies lead to mass protests in the summer of 2013, in which the students\textsuperscript{*} stood apart.(p.185)

This is not the place to retrace the course of the Sudanese revolution of 2019, which is one of the best-documented revolutions in world history due to the numerous video recordings and tweets. Certainly, if not the professionals in the SPA, at least the Communist Party was aware that the revolution would only have a chance if it stood connected with the “political society”. This chance is currently being squeezed by outside influences: not only by Janjaweed, Saudis and Emirates, USA, EU and Sissi, but also by the locusts and floods of this year and finally by Covid-19. Nevertheless, the next months will be all about exactly what the present book wants to focus on, and what will remain for some time in the slums and popular classes as a success of the fighting: the importance of neighbourhood committees (and refugee communities), even in times of inflation and scarcity, and the mutualism of the revolution.\textsuperscript{15} For a recent account mentioning the neighbourhood-committees see: Azza Mustafa and Sara Abbass (2020) Learning from Uprisings: Sudan’s December Revolution, in: Saab, A Region in Revolt, Mapping the Recent Uprisings in North Africa and West Africa, Ottawa and Amsterdam 2020.

Can the African “political society” be a key and inspiration to better understand the new and worldwide waves of protest, and their dilemmas and possibilities, as B&M write in their Conclusion?

It is certainly more true than ever that the middle-class scenario of global capitalism does not apply to Africa (p.193), and that global theories such as „the precariat“ (Badiou, Harvey) or „the multitude“ (Hardt/Negri) are just placeholders for something that can only develop anew in concrete struggles.
“Political society” is one more of these placeholders, but one which directs our attention into a specific direction. We take this from the closing words of B&M:

The protest of the poor in Africa is a response to a long-standing reality. It arises from the experience of a precarious life in all its aspects – not only from economic insecurity, but also from a complex political and socially determined human condition.

And:

What looks like unorganised, destructive protest can arise from an expansive informal self-organisation striving for autonomy or an end to state repression. The demands for change can be so clear to anyone marching in the streets – and to the state against which they are directed – that there is no need to set up formal programmes that the state would ignore anyway. Protests may not even be about formal political alternatives, but rather about creating informal alternatives in the first place.

Postscript: Remarks on Leaderless Revolutions

The term “Leaderless Revolution” was coined in 2011 by a British diplomat, Carne Ross, in a flow which had lead him from diplomatic service in the Second Gulf War towards some sort of anarchist thinking. In those days, that book was mostly discussed in the context of the Occupy movement, but it was also used in the context of the Egyptian revolution. The authors of a significant book on this tried to answer the question,

Was this really a ‘leaderless revolution,’ as so many pundits claimed, or were the protests an out-growth of the protest networks that had developed over the past decade? Why did so many people with no history of activism participate?

It would have been very interesting, in the context of „Africa Uprising“, to ask more systematically what the links could be between “leaderless revolutions” and the basic and material structures of “political society”. We should think these two together. B&M do not refer to “leaderless revolutions” at all – perhaps, in this respect, they stick too much to Fanon.

In 2019, there was a reverberation of the term, not only by activists like Hamza Hamouchene speaking about Algeria, but also by a watchdog from the US Think Tank CSIS, who even proclaimed “The Age of Leaderless Revolution”:

Mass protest movements are roiling politics around the globe. Over the past several days, the prime ministers of Lebanon and Iraq have agreed to resign and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Chile was cancelled—all due to massive, leaderless protest movements. At this very moment, protesters are out on the streets of not only Lebanon, Iraq, and Chile but also Hong Kong, Spain, Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, Haiti, Egypt, and Algeria. ...

Citizen grievances are many but share a common theme: the failure of ruling elites and political institutions to meet expectations of dignity and betterment. Protesters are frustrated with perceived corruption and economic inequality. Often young, angry, and urban, protesters are not an organized opposition proposing the substitution of their party or ideology for an existing one but a leaderless movement demanding their voices are heard. In some cases, protesters’ demands are clear; more often they are muddled. Across the board the aggrieved want change in systems that feel outdated, broken, or nonresponsive.

Obviously, the watchdogs like those from CSIS are on the alert. While the CSIS article called for “positive leadership” as a consequence, there is meanwhile, in the times of Corona, an overwhelmingly repressive leadership. Corona is a big game changer. This does affect global capital and Big Politics as well as everyday life. In African regions, repressive regimes plus scarcity of money might destroy what has been left over from “development”. Certainly, everything must change. Ways to survive social and climate crises have to be found in the periphery of
global capitalism, and against it. We need to hear the voices of the “ordinary people” who are affected there. As many of them do not articulate as speakers, there must be interpreters of agency. This is a high responsibility. Having a higher (much higher) quantity of people from the South here in Europe would make things much easier to understand.

Still, let us try to think “leaderless revolution”, „political society”, local networks of everyday resistance and survival, and transnational networks of migration together and refer them to each other. The quantity and agency of African youth, and their mobility, are the main material reality that we have to refer to. There is no “revolutionary” thinking without them. They make the future of what “leaderless revolutions” can be.²⁰ It is a pity that one of the latest good books on the 2019 uprisings: J. Saab, A Region in Revolt, Mapping the Recent Uprisings in North Africa and West Africa, Ottawa and Amsterdam 2020, has not much relation to these topics. It seems that many “socialists” are very far away from understanding the reality of “leaderless revolutions”.