

# AFRICA: THE POLITICS OF FAILURE

Basil Davidson

**The bald fact is that in Africa we have squandered almost 30 years with ineffective nation-building efforts. Our policies were far removed from social needs and developmental relevance.**

*Olusegun Obasanjo, former Head of State of Nigeria: 17 April 1990: OECD conference, Paris.*

**No one now disputes the centrality of popular participation and the human factor as the only viable developmental paradigm for Africa.**

*Adebayo Adedeji, former Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa of the United Nations, quoted here from weekly West Africa, 11 November 1991.*

And to the above quotations let us add a third, a good deal older but still with plenty of pith and point, saying that 'in this country, social warfare is under full headway, everyone stands for himself and fights for himself against all comers, and whether or not he shall injure all the others who are his declared foes, depends upon a cynical calculation as to what is most advantageous to himself.' If **Engels** had been writing about the arena of economic and political decision in Africa during the **1980s**, instead of about England in the **1840s**, he could have let his words completely stand. Moreover, 'this war grows from year to year, as the criminal tables show, more violent, passionate, and irreconcilable', and this, too, can be left to apply. Over these past years no few state powers – to call them governments would do them too much credit – became murderous tyrannies or else outrageous banditries whose chieftains, licensed still by 'world opinion' and its obedient press as being presidents or prime ministers, had ceased to care even for the verbal trappings of legitimacy. **Whatever happens, we have got the Maxim Gun, and they have not**, was a thought that is said to have reassured the colonial invaders of a hundred years ago. Nowadays, with the **AK47**, their local legatees can be safer still.

Yet Engels, writing about England during the **1840s**, was able to conclude that the war in question was a class war in which the **fact** of the bourgeoisie and the **fact** of the proletariat were realities which must dominate the scene. This being so, other conclusions followed, including the end of the war and a future of widening peace; and the future would

belong to these conclusions: about which, in this year of grace of 1992 rather little, from an **Engels** point of view, can be comfortably said. Now, we are told, everything is different: socialism has failed and history has ended, so that what we have now is what remains and what will remain, fiddled with or tarted up a little here and there but always surviving, more well or less well according to the ineffable mysteries of the Business Cycle but otherwise above the power of thought to see or move beyond it. For there is nothing beyond it. The presently scabrous horrors of most of Africa are not, **as** we had supposed, to be understood **as** the abrasions of a social process, as a wrestling of huge potentials whereby, soon or late, the conflicts of today may be overcome and left behind, meanwhile the science of serious analysis can be usefully applied. Not at all, for such ideas are exploded teleological myths and empty nonsense. These conflicts are part of an eternal landscape. Regime X may be on the skids, and President Y juggling with his foreign bank balances against imminent departure for Biarritz or wherever. But these are merely *faits divers* to be judged by the value of their TV footage. They have no other useful meaning and, as facts, can be left to rot until the advent of Regime Y and President Z: naturally and indeed inevitably, the mixture **as** before.

It may be so. But for those who find this prospect unacceptably begrovelling, or at any rate improbable, or at least open to doubt, there is bound to be something more to be said. The current scene in Africa, with which this essay is concerned, cannot be agreed to encourage even modest hope, let alone millennial hope; but at the same time it gives clear indications that there is a great deal more to be said. Socialism in any of its statist forms in Africa has certainly failed wherever one or other of such forms has been applied beyond the mere verbiage of propaganda, and there may be a true sense in which history, in this dimension, has indeed ended. Yet this is saying rather little. The applications of socialism, whether of one sort or another, whether 'scientific' or simply well-intended, were small or **short-winded**, or in any case destroyed by the handy AK47 of this or that gang of bandits (sometimes home-grown, sometimes not). They will not be tried again; it is far from certain that they will even be remembered. But then there is this other failure to be considered. Along with the failure of socialism there is the still larger and much more wounding failure of whatever, in Africa, has been introduced **as** capitalism: the failure, that is to say, to solve by the methods or systems of capitalism any great social or economic problem of indigenous African development. But isn't failure, in this context, perhaps too strong and final a word? Won't capitalism in Africa, just as in Europe and North America and Japan (yes, and the 'four little dragons' of Asia) work itself through to the stabilities of success? And if there are still sceptics to say no, it won't, then what prospect may one see for Africa while the future opens this ideological void in which the one system, like the other, is frustrated? These questions call at any rate for argument.



If we accept the currently most probable statistical measures, which are those of the World Bank and various agencies of the United Nations Organisation, Africa's prospect over the next thirty or forty years or so is one of gathering catastrophe in terms of deepening impoverishment, social dislocation, and inability to secure a better balance of profit and loss with the world of achieved industrialism. This is what the standard measures indicate. Even when allowing for a possible or even, as some say, probable pandemic of AIDS, the overall population will at least double over the next couple of decades, while the average continental capacity to produce more food – not to speak of other useful or essential things – will barely rise by more than the odd percentage point. Meanwhile the number of persons obliged to depend on purchased food will rise still more steeply and, it appears, irreversibly. Though still slower than in Latin America, the rate of 'urbanisation' – in plain language, the rate of increase in the number of refugees from rural impoverishment who survive in the squalor of serviceless cities (cities which do not deserve the name but are nonetheless given it) – has continued to climb over the past thirty years and will go on doing so. 'By 2025', according to some prudent conclusions, 'Southern Africa is projected to reach the level of urbanisation that presently exists in the developed world and Latin America. About half of the population of eastern and western Africa will live in urban areas at that time. In absolute terms' – applicable just as well to northern Africa – this means that the urban populations of Africa 'will increase from four to twelve times above their 1940 levels by 2025.'<sup>8</sup> Africa, in short, will be a continental slum.

Worse: for if these huge new 'urban' populations cannot make food grow out of city streets, while rural producers do not improve on their statistically deplorable performance of past decades, the necessary food will have to be imported: but there will be no money available to pay for such imports. Said the G7 leaders in July 1991, when asked about this: 'We agree on the need for additional debt relief measures, on a case by case basis (applied to the most indebted countries), going well beyond the relief already granted.' Nice words: but will it happen? Financially regarded, most of Africa is now in hopeless bankruptcy. External debt (in whatever way it is measured, short-term or long-term) has risen annually for many years now, and in 1992 is pretty well double what it was ten years earlier. Most of this debt is now well understood to be irrecoverable, and all that stays in question is the manner in which 're-scheduling' takes place, this being the verb for non-payment that is currently in fashion. There are various ways in which this actual and prospective burden of external debt can be calculated. 'Debt-service' is one of them. This means, crudely put, the proportion of the proceeds of exports which must be used to meet the demands of interest payment to external lenders before such proceeds can be used for anything else. This proportion is thought to have stood at

around fifteen percent in **1985**, and is certainly higher today, perhaps a lot higher. Even if no higher, this export of African wealth by way of debt-service is such that little or no capital remains behind for the purposes of productive investment. So Africa is not only poor: in relation to the industrialised countries, but also in relation to its own past history, Africa is getting poorer at a speed that ought to be found alarming by others than the victims (who certainly find it alarming). There is no current perspective, whether in the statistical measures or any interpretation of those measures, that this rate of impoverishment can be decelerated.

Now it is possible to question this prospect even when accepting the general veracity of the logic in the statistics. Doomsday scenarios, we are reasonably told, don't come true: the fruitfulness of life, as well as the fragility of statistical measurement, stands always gallantly in the way. This may be so in this African case, and we will come back to the possibility that it is so. In any case it needs to be said that many official statistical measures in this Africa are no more than propagandist artifacts. No one knows how much Africa-produced food, for example, comes to market through illegal or 'parallel' channels and never gets into anyone's statistics. We do not know who eats it, or how it is paid for. The case is general. As long ago as **1982-84** the United States Department of Commerce came to the conclusion, after wrestling in vain with the artifactual statistics of the West African republic of Benin (formerly the French colony of Dahomey), that some ninety percent of that republic's internal trade passed through unrecordable channels<sup>3</sup>: and it is a fair estimate that this conclusion, if somewhat higher than the probable average for other republics, was not excessively so. The statistics of most African nation-states, in other words, reflect an overall situation where the organs and agents of the nation-statist system no longer possess any significant measure of accountability. They are not to be believed because they are not seriously intended to convey belief.

Even when allowing for this deficiency – that the state no longer commands the respect of the citizens, and is more often seen, in practice, as being itself illegitimate – it still appears that Africa grows quite rapidly poorer in its capacity to satisfy the reasonable daily and even minimal demands of large populations for the basic needs of life. Measurement, once again, is more than difficult. There being no official welfare system in most African situations, it would seem on the face of things that rapidly increasing rates of non-employment in African 'urban areas' must indicate a widespread condition of, or imminence of, sheer starvation. But somehow or other, this is seldom what is seen. Corpses are not being carted off the streets of large African 'cities' in anything like the numbers that the statistics would lead you to assume: in this way or in that, the 'urban' masses manage to stay alive far more often than the official figures must lead you to think that they should. Petty crime, gang warfare, lineage

solidarity among those not yet severely divorced from their rural origins, and a host of ingenious escape routes from starvation appear, so far at least, to suffice. Civil society in terms of a rule of law, of a reasonable hope of amelioration, of social obligation and mutual respect, may go to the wall and in many cases has already reached **the wall**; but the surface appearances of life can still mislead. Another sheaf of statistics claims that a majority of Africans have a life expectancy at birth that has increased by some twelve years in recent times: from an estimated 37.8 years in 1950-55 to 49.4 years in 1980-85.<sup>4</sup>

All too clearly, the statistical evidence is at least unsatisfactory. Nonetheless the bulk of this evidence has to be accepted for want of any more reliable measurement. Even when allowing for the escape-routes provided by smuggling, illegality of other kinds, and all the rest, a large **fraction** of Africa's peoples remains in dire and even hopeless poverty, and the fraction is in all probability becoming annually higher rather than lower. By all the official evidence, in any case, the politics of capitalism, in any practical and *applied* sense, have entirely and even clamorously failed to promote any general and often any particular development in and of **Africa's** socio-economic structures. It **may** be useful to insist on this, if only because our Higher Journalism likes to tell us that the policies of capitalism, if only sufficiently applied, must always prevail in the end. On that view, Africa's current crisis of severe impoverishment is only another *fait divers*, another unlucky pile-up on the freeways of free enterprise such as good policing and sensible behaviour will soon sort out. Only patience is required. The workings of free enterprise may be hard to understand; they infallibly succeed in the end. Now this note of cheerful optimism sounds more or less clearly, if sometimes *sous entendu*, from all the great programmes and planifications of these recent years; and it has, no doubt, its own historicist legitimacy. Britain did succeed in emerging from the mass impoverishment of the 1840s by a process of holding on and plunging ahead, and British capitalism, at any rate till the 1900s, became a wonder of the world. If this could happen to Britain in the 19th century, surely it can happen to Africa in the 21st? **What** does the prospect have to say about that?

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The answer could be argued theoretically, of course, but here in this brief essay, which will avoid prophecy, I will consider it only in the case of one or two actual examples. They can offer no more than provisional or indicative answers but these, standing on facts rather than fantasies of the statistical sort, may still be useful. There is the case, to begin with, of the republic of Zaire, a country (or supposedly a country) which occupies a very big chunk of the tropical zones, is rich in natural resources, contains a population

perhaps annually increasing at a rate of three percent, and has a destiny for all these reasons which cannot sensibly be separated from the destiny of the rest of Africa, tropical or not. It will not be unreasonable to say that whatever happens in Zaire is going to happen, or is already happening, in much of the rest of the continent.

Zaire has been rather little noticed by the Higher Journalism, though the record in this respect is less deficient in the USA than in Britain. This British indifference to Zaire may be from mere bewilderment at complexities that seem all too exotic and peculiar, or else, as I have argued in another place, because the nation-state of Zaire, of what used to be the Belgian Congo until 1960, is really not there at all but is in truth a myth, a mere verbal usage, an idea without an existential content.' Since the late 1960s, the country called Zaire has been run not by a state power in any sense national by vocation or in origin, but by a presidential **extended-family** network of self-appointed 'authorities' and bureaucratic potentates, small in their number but great in their capacity for greed. 'The virtually unlimited power of those at the top', on a recent and well qualified judgment, 'has allowed them to plunder the natural riches of their country and to amass great **fortunes**.'<sup>6</sup> As early as 1976 in this degradation, which still continues in 1992 – a degradation reported by a wide variety of competent observers – the archbishop of Kinshasa, the country's capital, could affirm without denial that 'agonising situations' were now to hand: situations in which 'the thirst for money transforms men into assassins . . . and whoever holds a morsel of authority or means of pressure, profits from this to impose on people and exploit them.' Meanwhile, although not in a sense intended or foreseen by **Marx** and Engels, even this notional state in Zaire has been withering away. For in 1960 this enormous country possessed 88,000 miles of motorable roads, enough to stretch a meagre though valuable essential network over wide regions. But in 1985 the total mileage of motorable roadway had dwindled to 12,000; and of these no more than 1,400 were said, reliably, to be paved.

Looked at with attention, this state in Zaire is little more than its capital of Kinshasa, half a dozen biggish provincial towns together with zones of mineral extraction and crop plantation in the hands of foreigners, plus an army large but of dubious loyalty and an airline to carry the fortunate few between these points of 'state power'. Beyond this 'structure', out there in the bush, there is the limitless forest with its dissidents or rebels or, whenever the army gets down to work, its victims. In these circumstances, capital accumulation on behalf of any properly national project has been impossible outside the realm of propaganda. Accumulation has meant the building of private balances in banks abroad, as well as various means of nourishing these deposits; and while foreign entrepreneurs, perhaps needless to say, can and do operate within this 'structure', they do it with an ever more prudent hand. As for the statistics of this state in Zaire, these reach an artifactual nature of a positively dreamlike quality.

So it would seem, on the face of it, that capitalism's cheerful optimism can have no place here. Again, though, there is more to be said. Human ingenuity being what it is, Zaire begins to possess what some recent observers suggest must be the beginnings of a potentially and perhaps eventually dominant bourgeoisie by means of a 'second' or illicit economy of trade, and even of production, which has arisen from the futility and venality of the official, legal and 'first' economy. Necessity here, it would seem, has been operating as the mother of what is clearly a great deal of shrewd invention. Faced with the piracy of those who command state power, 'rural and urban dwellers devise strategies to survive Zaire's stringent conditions: urbanites who cannot live on their wages organise supplies of foodstuffs from rural areas, sending kerosene, salt, soap, cooking oil and other items that are unobtainable or unaffordable in rural areas to kin who send them manioc, rice, plantains, beans and other staples in exchange." Janet **McGaffey**, to whom principally we owe these enlightenments, calls this manifold withdrawal from any attempt to live and behave as the state officially supposes that people must and do a 'disengagement from the state'; but also, since this disengagement permits some escape from statist piracies – at a price in various bribes and conjurings – she sees it as a trend 'significant of class formation, because some of its activities allow considerable accumulation'. At the same time, 'for some rural and urban workers the activities of this ("second") economy provide a favourable alternative to wage labour and thus the means to avoid proletarianisation.' A 'new class' thus arises; and 'this new class is the beginning of a true economic bourgeoisie, as yet small and with an undetermined future.' Only abolish the worst coercions and perversions of the Zairist dictatorship, operative now over nearly thirty years, and the potential for growth of this 'new class' should become multiple and dynamic.

Comparable bourgeois 'emergences' could be easily displayed in a number of African countries, Nigeria and Kenya being the obvious examples south of the Sahara Desert. I do not know how many sterling millionaires there may be in those two countries – or other millionaires in other countries north of the Desert – but they are not few and they are becoming more, while a post-apartheid capitalism in South Africa will surely enlarge the same contrasts between private fortunes and public squalors. Yet it barely needs arguing, I imagine, that these phenomena are by no means necessarily those that confirm the development of a class system able to produce and guarantee a respectable bourgeois future. If it could so guarantee, then one must have expected the economies of Latin America, long since, to have advanced from political tyrannies of the Zairian sort to the sunny uplands of Westminsterian tolerance and virtue. Pace **McGaffey**, whose optimism I admire but cannot share, the pincers of the actual and existing economic order seem all too certain to nip any such

useful development in the bud. A New Economic Order, very true, might quickly change this perspective by reforming international terms of trade and other such mechanisms. But as matters stand now the subordinate nature of these ex-colonial (or '**neo-colonial**' in a much used term) systems of exchange has ensured that the transfer of real wealth to ex-imperial (or 'neo-imperial') economies in North America and Europe has continued, and still continues, no matter what depths of impoverishment thereby ensue.

It would therefore seem more likely that these ex-colonial economies have come too late to the feast: in one or other degree of failure, they will not be able to climb the stages of growth to the blessed level of high mass consumption, or anything like it. This seems to be where we 'are at' today. And even if a prolonged study were to expose this conclusion as an unjustified pessimism, it would still be the case that this is almost surely how a vast majority of these impoverished populations see and understand their situation and their future. If this is true, as the bulk of the available evidence undoubtedly agrees, then the grim paradox of our times is that the legacy of capitalist success in developed economies is what has become fatal to any such success in those that are not developed. It is a paradox, moreover, from which there is so far no known means of escape.



Socialism promised to provide an escape. Under whatever gloss or label, this promise of a means of escape from capitalist failure is what has typified the operative meaning of socialism to its African adherents, devotees or militants. Push aside quantities of verbiage, and you will invariably find that the dynamic attractions of the idea of socialism – of this or of that socialism, whether utopian or scientific or whatever, whether intellectually coherent or merely the **waffle** of demagogues – have consisted in their demonstration of standing for the reverse of whatever has been understood by the consequences of capitalism; and on this, of course, the world is nowhere near the point at which the last relevant word has been said. Nor do I think for a moment, all recent history notwithstanding, that the achievements of revolutionary movements of anti-colonial insurrection – I am thinking here of Africa, although the same may be true elsewhere – can be written down as failures. In the Portuguese African colonies, so often cited, these movements reached their objectives, more often than not and against huge obstructions, with a remarkable degree of moral solidity and intellectual coherence. Only then – and especially after 1977 – were they denied, turned back and eventually ruined. Partly by their **Marxism-Leninism** imported from a Stalinist Moscow, reinforcing bureaucratic centralism against the participatory politics of the liberation war. And partly, after 1978, by the armed banditries invented and inserted and

fuelled by the apartheid regime in South Africa with more or less enthusiastic American support and finance.

Could it have been otherwise without these 'East-West' interventions? There is much to suggest that it could have been otherwise: but in other international circumstances. That discussion would be out of place here. What we have is that none of the socialist routes of escape has proved viable: the capitalist failure is accompanied by a socialist failure. It may be said that this failure of the 'capitalist model' has been far greater and more clamorous than the failure of the 'socialist model', for the 'capitalist model' has been far more often and persistently tried and has had the benefit of an enormously greater quantity of external finance and advice. But this is meagre comfort. The socialist project has failed at almost all levels. Yet I should like to insist upon the failure of the 'capitalist model' – thinking still about Africa – because the policies of capitalism are still put forward as though they at any rate have not failed. There seems little danger that the Soviet model, or anything like it, will ever be tried again. But the standard Western model is still in high fashion, and is paraded now as though its credentials and credits were really beyond sensible criticism. And I point this out here not as some kind of last-ditch socialist alibi but because those credentials and credits are so very few and feeble.

Consider only the remedies advised for the salvation of countries subjected to one-party rule or to the no-party dictatorship for which **one**-party rule has generally prepared the way. Africa can show a dismal string of such countries. For them the advised remedies consist of organising a system of many parties. And no doubt there is everything to be said for political competition in the matter of ideas, objectives, persons and methods. But what will prove effective in class-structured countries of 'actually existing capitalism' may still prove nothing of the kind in countries without **crystalised** class structures and a corresponding economic system.

The African examples are many and various, if now conveniently forgotten. In 1960 – but the example could be easily repeated – the Somalian colonies became independent (and largely united) under a parliamentary dispensation of admirable ingenuity. Several political parties were in attendance at this birth, and the most influential of them had an undeniably representative quality. But few years passed before it became abundantly clear that this multi-party system was deep in trouble. And the reason for trouble was only in small degree a question of human frailty. Corruption and perversion came in because the multi-party system could not be in practice what it claimed to be in theory. The reason for this was not a weakness in constitutional drafting. The reason was that the Somalis, as a people and political culture, were not structured on class-divisive lines but on clan-divisive lines. This led straight into clan and sub-clan **clientelism**. By 1968, with clientelism run riot, Somalis had achieved no fewer than

62 parliamentary parties (*read*: groups for dividing up the spoils of power) for an electorate far smaller than Somalia's 3 million people; and such was the uproar and corruption that a military coup *d'état* was carried out in 1969 without a shot being fired. And today, in the wake of fresh disasters essentially of the same clan-structured origin, Somalia has ceased to be a state in any practical sense.

This is the clientelist bankruptcy that receives its complete confirmation, if one were still needed, in the Zaire whose miseries we have already briefly inspected. With the ferocious but inept Mobutist dictatorship near collapse in 1990, a return to multi-party democracy was proclaimed; and by 1991 Zaire enjoyed the blessings of . . . yes, no fewer than 230 political **parties**<sup>9</sup>. So it has come about that the nation-statist frameworks of the capitalist model – the model installed at decolonisation, but in this respect no differently from the socialist model – have produced a pair of harsh alternatives; and it is with these alternatives that Africa's political fate is now challenged. What has happened is this: either there has been a strong centralised state, buttressed by an overweening army and an abundant police force, and this strong state, having no roots in any broad public participation, falls under bureaucratic and then personal dictatorship: at which point the Zairian misery is reached. Or there has been a weak centralised state and this, for essentially the same reasons in lack of public legitimacy, becomes the victim of 'multi-party' clientelism – Europeans have liked to call it 'African tribalism' – at which point another dictatorship duly awaits. It can be said that this degradation was encouraged in the Soviet-style cases – Ethiopia's under the Mengistu dictatorship is probably the most obvious among them – because this was what dominant actors in Moscow thought would best suit them. But is there anyone to imagine that the Mobutist dictatorship in Zaire could have been installed, and could then have survived for more than a quarter of a century, unless this had suited the interests of dominant actors in the West?

In terms of current perspectives all this belongs to the failure of post-colonial politics. Much more could be said to the same effect: in today's ideological void, when one or other grim alternative still awaits, the failure becomes ever more flagrant. Of course we hear it said that this failure comes from African incompetence, irresponsibility, or sheer ignorance. There have been plenty of all three. But I suspect that history will award the greatest and most damaging incompetence to a little mentioned source: to the readiness of African intellectuals, whether in public life or not, to listen obediently to whatever advice or guidance that arrives from outside Africa. One can't but notice that every great plan of revival or 'restructuring' evolved by this or that portentous agency in the developed world, time after time for year after year, has been greeted with respect by African authorities, and not seldom with subservience, before being applied with attitudes of rigid discipline. The West has known best; for

some, even the East has known best. In any case Africa itself has not known best. And so we arrive at continental immiseration on a scale never known before.

Lately, the connection has been noted. If the think-tanks and aid industries have so regularly got it wrong – that they have so repeatedly had to contradict each other – perhaps Africans in Africa may after all be able to get it right, or at least less wrong? The question has been asked: The answers thus far remain partial and tentative. But they still strike notes that are new.



The problem is at any rate clear. It is to mark out and begin to follow a pathway round the two alternatives, each of which depends in one sense or another upon a non-representative centralism: so as to reach a condition in which the state regains its historical accountability. Regains: this needs emphasis. For the pre-colonial state in Africa, whenever successful in its stability and capacity for self-development, possessed accountability, enjoyed legitimacy, deployed a representative quality. These achievements were reached by a multiplicity of structures, compensatory mechanisms, and practical compromises of a style and nature no longer possible or desirable in the world of **today**.<sup>10</sup> But the principle of that success hasn't therefore changed. To find a pathway round the twin alternatives of failure, the politics of success has to be a politics arising from the arenas of mass debate. Which means, in practice and result, arising from local decision.

Thirty years ago and less, this was what thinkers in the mould of **Amílcar Cabral** and the few others like him argued in their time and place. They argued for 'people's participation' in the process of politics, for *participação* popular, as the high road to state legitimacy. But few listened, few took them seriously: the guiding voice from outside, then, was either Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism, or else it sang the charms of bountiful Free Enterprise; and one or other form of non-participation followed. But today it begins to be different. In one way or another and a variety of languages, the case for 'people's participation' (however defined) is what today's really interesting African thinkers argue among themselves and to whomever else will listen.

'No one now disputes the centrality of popular participation and the human factor as the only viable developmental paradigm for Africa'" is a statement that carries a very solid weight in its context, for its maker, Adebayo **Adedeji**, has a staunchly deserved reputation for penetrating insight and integrity of judgment. For several years when he was recently secretary-general of the UN Economic Commission for Africa, he has used his considerable reputation to reinforce the politics of representative democracy; and in this respect, among African intellectuals, he has been

by no means alone. I could fill this essay with comparable quotes, and anyone who closely follows the African political scene could do the same. The 'centrality of popular participation' – the need for it, the means of achieving it – is what, **these** many voices say, can save the state from clientalism on one side and dictatorship on the other.

That 'no one now disputes' this centrality is of course a huge exaggeration. All sorts of interested persons dispute it: the clientelist politicians and their bureaucratic hangers-on, the 'strong men' and their subordinate killers, many hopeful members of extended families down to the third and fourth **generation**, all these and many more dispute the centrality of participation as a means of government. Any number of elected committees bent on making participation work will find themselves packed with energetic persons bent on **preventing** any such thing. No doubt; the known cases are many and will certainly be more. It remains that displacing centralised force and fraud by decentralised structures of discussion and decision is the only programme now available that wins widening respect and commands serious purpose.

Considered broadly, this trend of thought – already to some extent a trend of action, too – is still at an early stage of its development. A listing of relevant 'cases' would mention initiatives in perhaps a dozen countries: in Uganda since the advent of Musaveni, in Ghana since the recent years under Rawlings, in Nigeria at various moments over the past dozen years but especially over the last four or five with Babangida presiding, now and then elsewhere. The heritage of Cabral and his kind has also found impressive legatees, moreover, in what may now perhaps be reckoned as the most successful of all the anti-colonial movements of armed struggle: the Eritrean People's Liberation Front which fought its way to power in Eritrea against truly overwhelming military odds in 1990 and then, though still unnoticed by the world at large, presented the world with a consummately skilful **political dénouement**. For instead of simply declaring a state and taking possession of it, there being no longer any force anywhere to prevent them from doing this, Isseyas Afewerki and his colleagues did not do this. They remained loyal to their wartime politics of **participation**. They would declare the independence of Eritrea and the foundation of an Eritrean state in two years' time when things had settled down, when representative parties could be formed, when elections by universal suffrage could be held under a constitutional rule of law: elections in advance of which the EPLF, the victorious front of liberation, would have declared itself dissolved. When, in short, participatory politics freed from the many constraints of the war could begin to enjoy a free run.

More widely in the vast region of the Horn of Africa, the case of **post-Mengistu Ethiopia** provides another scene of relevant evidence. -The winners here, chiefly but not solely the **Tigray People's Liberation Front**, passed at once to declarations of a similar intent. The very difficult and

complex 'nationalities question' in Ethiopia, bitter fruit of the old imperial dictatorship and its many years of gross discrimination in favour of the ruling Amhara, would be solved by policies of decentralisation to autonomous assemblies and executives; and by the end of 1991, with the process still underway, it could at least be said with confidence that these policies were beginning to work. 'Submerged' or 'forbidden' nationalities, to use the language of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire, have already found themselves welcomed to the light of legality and recognition, and, while blinking somewhat in half-disbelieving surprise, have begun to make their voices heard. And all this has been done, let it be added, in the absence of any mandatory advice or guidance from the outside world, including, crucially, the USA and the USSR. It is a combination of circumstances that merits thought.

We shall see. I have heard it argued, for example, that policies of consistent devolution of powers 'to the periphery' – to the 'grass roots', in another familiar usage – will mean endless fission and secession into unworkable groups, tribes, nationalities, nations, even nation-states. Certainly, consistent devolution may threaten administrative efficiency. But against this there may be two things to be said. The first is **2**that some loss of statist efficiency is probably part of the price, at the position we have reached now, that Africa will have to pay for the revival of civil society, although this price may well be a lot less in practice than may be feared. The second, more important, is that nationalism in Africa – as distinct from clientelism masquerading as nationalism, which is what we so often have today – is not in itself a potent force. Its roots are often shallow, its rhetoric weak, its attraction powerful only when a people's welfare is felt to be denied or repressed. In a large sense African nationalism has been the child of colonialism: remove the hand of repression and the evidence suggests, more often than not, that trans-ethnic co-operation, even trans-ethnic fusion, ceases to be difficult.

A simple historical comparison can make the point. Forty years ago, early in the process of formal decolonisation, widespread movements of anti-colonial nationalism in East and West Africa declared for programmes of federalising unification: so that, for example, fourteen colonies of France should become two federalised unions and not, as Paris then insisted and as what befell, fourteen nation-states; and something of the same kind came under discussion among the nationalists of (then) British East Africa. None of these initiatives won any tolerance in London or Paris. But in 1975, wrestling with the early years of the nation-state disaster and again pressing ideas of their own, the leading nationalists of sixteen West African states declared themselves in favour of forming a unified 'economic community', since when they have proceeded somewhat further. If little has so far been achieved, the objective is still there and has been lately reaffirmed in a formal treaty.

It may go without saying that all such efforts to break out of stagnation or regression take place in a world more surely dominated than ever before by powerful systems of trans-national capitalism in the developed world; and no one in Africa today, so far as I know, questions their continued mastery of the international scene. But what is beginning to be widely questioned, I think, is the automatic assumption that what is good for the developed world can necessarily be good for – in this case – the African world. No doubt policies of political devolution – participatory policies – will be applied within market economies, within capitalist economies of some kind or other. But the actual nature and functioning of those economies, and who commands them and how they are to be commanded and promoted, remain questions to which there are as yet no clear and obvious answers. An impressive essay in last year's *Socialist Register* posed the question, for Hungary but also more widely for Eastern Europe, of what kind of capitalist economies can be built without capitalist classes; and the question remains open for Africa as well.<sup>12</sup> In much of Africa the basic policy of the past thirty years has been to use surplus extracted from rural economies in order to industrialise urban economies, and the policies of devolution are now aimed precisely at rectifying the excessive and even reckless ways in which this policy has been applied. If this means 'slowing down development', so much the better, for 'rapid development', more often than not, has meant no development. What African thinkers seem now to be working towards is a system within which market economies work for those who serve and use them, locally and now, having regard to their own capacities and needs. How far the developed world of multi-national concentrations of power will bring itself to tolerate this devolutionary politics of participation, and its democratic implications, is another question to which, at present, we do not have an answer.

## NOTES

1. Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Leipzig 1845, here from Marx and Engels *On Britain*, Moscow 1953 English edition, p. 165 and *passim*.
2. Chinua Achebe and three others (eds), *Beyond Hunger in Africa*, London 1990, James Currey, pp. 44.
3. Chris Allen, *Benin*, note 5 to ch. 4, p. 134: London 1989, Pinter Publishers.
4. Achebe, p. 43.
5. Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State*, New York 1992, Times Books; London 1992, James Currey: at various points in an analysis of nation-statist failures in Africa with comparisons to Eastern Europe.
6. Janet MacGaffey, 'Economic Disengagement and Class Formation in Zaire', in Donald Rothchild and Naomi Chazan, *The Precarious Balance*: Boulder and London 1988, Westview Press; p. 175. Dr MacGaffey has argued this case at length in her new book, *The Real Economy of Zaire*, University of Pennsylvania Press and James Currey London, 1988, but I have not yet been able to read it.
7. J.A.A. Ayode, 'States without Citizens', in Rothchild and Chazan, p. 106.
8. MacGaffey, p. 183.
9. Mark Huband, *The Guardian* London, 29 July 1991.

10. cf. Davidson, *passim*.
11. Adedeji as reported in the weekly *West Africa*, 11 November 1991.
12. Peter Bihari, 'From Where to Where? Reflections on Hungary's Social Revolution', *Socialist Register*, London 1991, pp. 279.