THE AFRICAN PROSPECT
SOME NOTES AND COMMENTS
Basil Davidson

Much socialist discussion of Africa has appeared to suffer from assumptions that are mutually contradictory as well as generally mistaken. On the one hand, there was the thought (or perhaps it was rather more an attitude of mind?) that African situations and experience have been, or are, so entirely "different" as not to be comparable with the situations and experience of peoples elsewhere. On the other hand, there was the thought (again, perhaps, merely an attitude of mind?) that models for radical change elsewhere could be usefully applied to the problems of Africa. Of these two assumptions, alike the offspring of a lack of understanding which was itself the child of imperialism, the second has probably done the more damage, since it has led to a repeated failure to notice, much less to analyse, the specificity of African conditions for growth and change.

From this has flowed a double woe: first, there has been a tendency to apply non-African prescriptions in a mechanical, dogmatic and sometimes quite meaningless way; secondly, there has been a companion tendency to under-estimate the possibilities for effective action by Africans themselves. We have suffered, in short, from a certain paternalism of the European Left, a certain implication that Africans are too "backward" to be able to defend themselves, so that others should help them with the necessary models. This comes out, occasionally, even in the work of otherwise penetrating and sympathetic writers. Thus Arrighi and Saul (Socialist Register 1969) feel able to advise that "the point is simply that the decisive battles in Rhodesia and South Africa will have to be fought in the 'cities'", without making it clear, however, whether they mean that the end-battles will have to be fought there (which is obvious), or that such battles for independence become "decisive" only when fought in the cities (which is not obvious at all). The fact is that many great battles of this kind or of other kinds have been won or lost—have passed their "decisive" stage—in their opening moves, in the early positions adopted by the contestants, in the groundwork for the final advance that leads to success.

"Put somewhat differently," Arrighi and Saul continue, "it could be argued that, if the relevant model for the struggle in the Portuguese territories is perhaps some blending of the Chinese and Cuban experiences, the relevant model for Rhodesia and South Africa may
be a blend of the Cuban experience and that of the Afro-Americans in the United States! One may welcome this opening up of Africa's perspectives to the "comparability" of other continents, while still finding it hard to see what value can lie in such model-making. It begs the question of profoundly diverse conditions of struggle, and it introduces what may well be elements of confusion. By 1969, moreover, the peoples of the Portuguese territories could very reasonably claim to have constructed their own models, while those in Rhodesia and South Africa had at least made some headway in doing the same.

The real point here, surely, is that the struggle in the Portuguese territories (for example) is now more than ten years old; that this struggle has produced a vast amount of new experience from which many lessons have been learned or not learned; and that, for the purposes of analysis, it is this kind of experience which must count for most in forming judgments about the prospects for nationalist revolution in sub-Saharan Africa. If one reflects upon this many-sided experience—and there is now quite a lot of useful evidence to hand—one may well conclude that broad statements about a "proletarianized peasantry", about peasants (even in the context of South Africa) not being able to provide a "sure and sustained base for revolutionary action", are no longer adequate to our need for understanding.

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In considering what has been achieved, or not achieved, by movements of national liberation using guerrilla action in Africa, during the past ten years especially, perhaps the first point to reflect upon is that they have operated within rural cultures of an extreme technological simplicity. It has been said elsewhere, but may bear repeating, that Cuba and Vietnam (for example) must be regarded as advanced cultures when compared with these. A comparison with some of the rural cultures of Latin America might be less distant, although even with these there would be many reservations to be made, given the great diversity of "surrounding conditions". Much that Kiernan and Hobsbawm have to say in this volume is relevant to this point.

A second point to make—and this is not much less true of South Africa than of Rhodesia and the Portuguese territories—is that the majority of rural people within these cultures are still enclosed within traditional structures of thought, behaviour and expectation. No doubt the colonial period has done much to dismantle these structures; no doubt the dismantlement continues at a sharpening pace: the fact remains that their ethos, their ideology, and thus their limits of thought and speculation about the future, still have great power to shape men's action—or inaction.
Thus Cabral on Guiné:

Our traditions—or, if you wish, our economic structure—are such that our Fula peasants or our semi-feudalized peasants often have a tendency to follow their chiefs. So their mobilization has required a profound and intensive labour. . . . Does the peasantry represent the main revolutionary force? This is the basic question. In the case of GuinC, I must at once answer that it does not. Will it therefore seem strange that we should have (nonetheless) based our whole revolt on the peasantry? The peasantry represents the country as a whole; it controls and produces its wealth; it is materially strong. Yet we well know by experience what trouble we have had in bringing the peasantry into the struggle. . . .

If the "motor of the revolution" is thus the revolutionary party or movement, it is still among the rural multitudes that the base has to be found. Without that base, it seems, nothing can be achieved, whether in the countryside or afterwards in the towns: this is the base, the peasant base, whose winning to the cause of change is essential to any success. And most of what has happened, or not happened, in southern Africa during the past ten years suggests that this is as true of Rhodesia and even of South Africa as it is of Angola, Guiné and Mozambique.

Supposing the need for radical change, how then is this essential base, this peasant base, to be securely established—given the scepticism, reluctance and traditional thoughts and loyalties of the rural multitudes? In answering this absolutely crucial question—the same question, as Hobsbawm shows, that is repeatedly central to Latin American situations as well—the experience and methods of action of the PAIGC and its companion movements in the Portuguese colonies can well claim to be notably illuminating. Time and again the rural multitudes in these colonies have demonstrated, and demonstrate today, that they can indeed provide a "sure and sustained base for revolutionary action", provided always that the revolutionaries have the courage, skill and patience to form it. One could even say, perhaps, that liberation movements in the "Third World" can best be judged by their capacity, or lack of capacity, to win widespread rural adherence. Those, like the PAIGC in Guiné, who have known how to root themselves deeply into peasant soil have gone from success to success; those which have not have withered and failed.

It should therefore follow that nothing better deserves study and analysis, in this whole context, than the action and experience through which the PAIGC, for example, has won its sure and sustained rural adherence. Here indeed the old tag again seems justified: *Ex Africa semper aliquid novi*. . . . For here in these distant landscapes pre-literate and pre-mechanical rural peoples, living still within ancestral frameworks of belief and expectation, have gone far to overcome their handicaps. They have learned how to unite and organize for distant and difficult objectives of which they themselves, for the most part,
had no inkling a dozen years ago. They have learned how to sink their ethnic differences, how to set aside their ancient oppositions, how to assuage their traditional conflicts. They have accepted the bitter lessons of self-sacrifice, even in the face of a comparatively tremendous weight of shot and shell, "sprinkled with napalm" (as Kiernan says) where they used to be sprinkled with holy water, and scourged by comparatively huge Portuguese armies. And all this they have achieved under socio-economic conditions which are reproduced nowhere else in the "Third World", save marginally and with the partial exception of some regions of Latin America. Having achieved this, they may reasonably claim to have written a new chapter in the history of radical social change. That few people outside Africa—or even inside Africa—should have bothered as yet to read this chapter is no reason, one may think, for mistaking its importance.

In the light of this experience of the 1960s, and of much other experience in politically independent Africa, what is the "picture which emerges"? Arrighi and Saul say that it is not bright, among other things because international capitalism, linked to South African imperialism, may be about to rationalize and reassert its domination of Black Africa. This seems to imply, at least to me, that something other than this rationalization was to be expected—that the western capitalist structure would not, in any case, prove capable of readjusting its demands and pressures to the new "decolonized" circumstances it had helped to create. Whereas in truth, no doubt, all that complex of modification and readjustment which goes under the label of "neocolonialism" was always inherent in the whole movement of "decolonization".

Given this, the general prospect is undoubtedly not bright. But the interesting question, perhaps, is whether it is dimmer—or brighter—than the facts have permitted. Many of those who supported the decolonising process of the 1950s-early 1960s may have hoped or expected that African nationalism would present "an effective challenge to imperialism"; in some sense, of course, it has certainly presented such a challenge (it all depends upon what is meant by "effective"). But the challenge was necessarily met by a counter-challenge—that of "neocolonialism"—and, at any rate since about 1963, it has been sufficiently clear that the general western structure of capitalism had learned, or was learning, how to accommodate itself to the situation which first began to emerge in 1951 with the domestic autonomy of the Gold Coast. And that the lesson would be learned, in one way or another, should have surprised no one who had followed even the published trends of official thought in London or Paris: all that re-
mained in doubt, after 1960, was the extent to which the lesson would be successfully applied, during the years immediately ahead, in continuing to give the western capitalist structure (whether directly or by way of intermediaries such as South Africa) its position of dominance.

Advancing from here, however, we arrive at truly controversial ground on which subjectivities of judgment become increasingly hard to control. As things stand today, there is no doubt that most of politically independent Africa is deeply penetrated, and to that extent controlled, by economic, social and cultural influences of a "neo-colonialist" type. There is equally no doubt that those few republics (such as Guinea and Tanzania) which have managed to elude or reduce this type of control, partially at least, nonetheless remain economically in a "palaeo-colonial" posture: they are obliged to export raw materials and cash crops, in return for consumer or investment goods, at prices fixed by the "world market". It is thus a truism to say that Africa is at best in the earliest phase of economic liberation. Yet the general experience of the 1960s, however discouraging it may be to socialists hoping for quick returns, is by no means always so reassuring to those who hope that Africa will remain an obedient component of the general western structure of capitalism, and, as such, will leave its own indigenous development until the Greek Kalends.

The issue would appear to turn, essentially, on the condition and nature of that much-debated grouping of men and women, the so-called African bourgeoisie. Is there, to begin with, sufficient evidence to show that privileged strata in most African countries (the case of South Africa may prove eccentric here) can or will grow into a "national bourgeoisie" capable of completing, or of participating in the completion of, the anti-colonial liberation movements of the 1950s-early 1960s? To this question there is now, it seems, a fairly general agreement in the negative, and here no doubt is one of the elements in producing a "not bright" prospect. Whether or not the rural multitudes become a base for radical change, whether or not a revolutionary working class may develop in Africa, there is not in any case going to be a revolutionary middle-class.

Is there, then, going to be a middle-class, a capitalist class, which can at least act as an effective partner with the western capitalist structure in maintaining the whole system? Is there, in other words, going to be a middle-class which can at least evolve its own ideology, and, through its agency with foreign partners, impose a capitalist hegemony on any African state? If the answer is yes, then indeed the prospect for democratic growth and change must be exceedingly dim, not to say hopeless. In that case we may confidently if sadly expect to watch a future of "primitive class accumulation" during which this
middle-class, these middle-classes, fortified behind their barricades of military and police, grow powerful and easy at the direct cost of the masses of rural and city people. And when that is done, we shall have "Latin America in Africa".

There are those who believe this process already far advanced. "In sum," say Arrighi and Saul, "the 'Latin Americanization' of independent Africa is well underway." Yet it can be argued that this comparison with Latin America is wide of the mark:

1. Historically, the crystallization of ruling strata of a capitalist type in Latin America was greatly assisted by social, ethnic and political factors which are generally not present in Africa. Crudely, it can be said that power in much of Latin America passed from Spain and Portugal to Spanish and Portuguese settlers and their immediate dependents. The comparison is with Rhodesia today and not, for example, with Nigeria.

In most of Africa, by contrast, power passed around 1960 to black Clites who nonetheless remained linked, and by a myriad ties, to the masses of their people. It has been, and it will be, far more difficult for these Clites, in trying to evolve into a crystallized and distinctive class or even into an *Interessengemeinschaft* (a sort of proto-bourgeoisie), to "kick away the ladder" than it was for the 19th century Clites of most of Latin America. So much is clear from the extreme political mobility of the 1960s, with their sudden coups, their swift rise to power of "unknown men", their sheer flexibility of response.

2. It was possible for the evolving Clites in much of Latin America to produce at least the semblance of an independent ideology and even of an independent economic system within the general capitalist structure. Against whatever difficulties and internal weaknesses, nascent Latin American middle-classes could get themselves born and out of their infancy through the interstices, as it were, of the general structure. That structure had by no means achieved the organic strength and resilient unity of purpose and design which it has since developed. Nascent African middle-classes have not had, and by all the signs they will not have, this relative freedom of growth.

Numerically weak native Clites arrived in power during the 1960s (or in some cases before), and tried to grow in power. In this they have certainly shown much energy and initiative; it can scarcely be said, however, that they have succeeded in affirming their positions of leadership. No case better than that of the first Nigerian federation, perhaps, shows the drama of their failure. It can be argued, in short, that these "proto-middle-classed"—given the circumstances in which they have been, and are, obliged to operate—have arrived too late on the scene. They are undoubtedly there, and so are their ambitions and their foreign partners; but history, if you will, has really left them
behind—even when, as in Nigeria's first federation, they have seemed to have a clear field before them and every sort of favour. In a sense that has not been true of most of the Latin American ruling strata, they seem condemned to remain "a very weak and subordinate link in the world capitalist system". If this argument holds good they will be able to exist and grow, as they do now, only as the local agents, whether commercial or political, of capitalist interests immeasurably more powerful than themselves. As such, they will continue to be, as they are now, acutely vulnerable to the pressures and discontents of the masses in town and countryside.

3. It can be further argued that they will not be able to resist or control such pressures and discontents. To begin with, they are bound to use methods of class formation and accumulation that are as obvious as they are painful to those at whose expense such methods are applied—the masses in town and countryside from whom, in fact, these "proto-bourgeoisies" are separated neither by hierarchical tradition, religious belief, nor social system. That such methods could be "made acceptable"—could be imposed—in 19th century Europe, or even in 19th century Latin America, is no good ground for thinking that they can now succeed in most of Africa.

There is another way in which the times are against them. Africa's emergent middle-classes are condemned to embark on their adventure of class formation in a period marked by a number of potent adverse factors. For the first time in history, so far as we know, there is now in Africa a rapidly widening gap between the general rate of population growth and the rate of productive growth in foodstuffs and other necessities. Populations which appear to be increasing at somewhere between $2\frac{1}{2}$ and 3 per cent a year are faced, in consequence, with stagnant or falling standards of everyday consumption. The examples are many; not all of them are from Africa's poorer countries. Thus "for almost a decade wages in Ghana have been falling behind the cost of living. . . . (Yet) if wages have almost stood still, the government-fixed price paid to cocoa farmers when translated into sterling, is actually lower, even after the recent increase (of 1969), than it was just over 10 years ago. . . ."9

The Clites, in short, are really up against it. Most of them are socially differentiated from their fellow citizens only in ways that are tenuous and fragile. "So-and-so may be getting very rich and powerful—but after all, he's only my mother's brother. . . ." And they must deepen this differentiation, systematize and "ideologize" it, at a time when most of their fellow citizens live no better than before, or even worse. From angles such as these it may appear at least very premature to conclude that "the 'Latin Americanization' of independent Africa is well under-way." It has certainly begun: but how far will it, can it, go?
This is not to argue that the weight of "emergent middle classes" will not continue to be felt on the side of a greater integration into the western capitalist structure. It is merely to argue that this weight may be far smaller than some observers have proposed. Further, that it may in the end prove quite incapable of stabilizing African republics as subordinate fragments of the general capitalist system. It would be possible, moreover, to draw the same conclusion in reverse about the industrial and urban wage-workers of Africa. Whether or not they may be said to constitute a working class, wage-workers have played a generally far more significant role in the movements of decolonization and independence than has often been recognized. French Guinea and Northern Rhodesia were only two colonies in which their action was crucially important in the winning of political rights. Since then, as many incidents and situations of the 1960s have suggested, wage-workers have repeatedly arrived at an understanding of their relative position in society such as they very seldom possessed in the 1940s or even in the 1950s, and so at a corresponding maturity for action against the "neo-colonialist" situations of today. Here again the prospect may not be bright, but neither is it dim.

In these circumstances, what then are the objectives of the liberation movements, whether in the politically independent countries, pushing for greater sovereignty and freedom of action, or in the countries still under colonial or racist rule? How far are these objectives defined in any precise doctrine of progress: how far can they be so defined? As much of Kiernan's paper makes clear, there is no short answer to questions which arise from complexities as dense as those of Africa today. In reaching for a tentative answer, however, it seems likely that most of our "big words" and slogan-like prescriptions—whether "socialism" or the "non-capitalist road" or whatever variations on these—may well miss the central point of action and intent.

In the case of the Portuguese independence movements, for example, there is rather little talk of socialism to be heard. If there is much talk of revolution, always it is talk that is closely pinned to actual situations or problems. But it is precisely in this respect that the best of these movements may be thought to reveal their true ideological significance. They have been obliged to inspect the deepest roots of the reality within which they live and have their being. They have had to discover in the hard way—in the hardest of all possible ways, for such is the nature of guerrilla warfare and political insurrection—exactly what the rural and the town people of their territories think and want, believe and hope for. Having discovered this, they have had to shape their objectives and evolve their policies in line with this reality. When
they think of revolution, accordingly, they do not think of socialism: could anyone, indeed, seriously consider building socialism in countries as productively poor and technologically backward as these are? They think of revolution, it seems, in two inseparable objectives: first, a revolution against the traditional structures of the past, and, secondly, a revolution against the structures of the colonial present.

Only a dual revolution such as this, one hears them argue, will be capable of carrying through the long and difficult transition of these cultures from the systems and structures of the past to system and structures capable of entirely new methods and relations of production: of new methods and relations, that is, which will be able to raise the level of general living standards while at the same time constructing new and valid (because indigenously conceived and formed) structures of democratic participation at all levels of society. Along this line of thought, what Africa accordingly requires in the present and foreseeable future is not socialism in the sense that industrialized peoples have conceived it—as a revolution against capitalism—but a system of production, a system of participation, which will be revolutionary both against African tradition and against colonial practice.

This it is that the best of the liberation movements now begin to link more or less closely, in basic thought and attitude, with the policies of certain independent countries, notably those of TANU in Tanzania. The problem, in short, is not to transform capitalism into socialism, for no native capitalist system exists to be so transformed: the problem is to build a coherent system such as will be able to release and channel the energies of Africa's peoples as they are now. One may reply, of course, that this new system must be in the direction of socialism, since it cannot be in the direction of capitalism. Yet it may be as well for us, when seeking to understand what these movements are about, not to short-circuit the argument.

These comments are only a contribution to continuing discussion—a discussion about Africa, as it happens, which The Socialist Register has already done a good deal to bring into being. Another large point remains. What can be done, what should best be done, by those outside Africa who want to help these movements of liberation?

On this point, too, a review of the 1960s might show that while the position is certainly not bright, it could still be a lot worse. There would be no great exaggeration in saying that ten years ago the European Left, sensu largo, knew nothing about Africa and, if possible, cared less. In 1970 it at least knows and cares something, makes "connections" between Africa and the rest of the world that it never made before, and, generally, grows steadily more concerned with these
matters. In a wider sense, moreover, there is possibly some reason for a measured optimism. Unexpectedly enough, partial sanctions against the racist rulers of Rhodesia are still in force, nearly five years after they were first applied, and are much wider (though still very partial) than when first applied. At least as far as Britain is concerned, a largely effective ban on arms shipments to South Africa is likewise still in force. These are gains which seem, and must seem, very minimal to the Africans involved; but they are nonetheless not to be sneezed at in a world where the balance of payments seems to have taken the place of Holy Writ. Sanctions on the Rhodesian rebels have not been effective, largely because of South Africa and Portugal, but they have won a fair degree of honest observance from a wide range of countries, and, to that extent, they have tended to place Rhodesia beyond the pale of world acceptance. The British arms ban on South Africa is similarly far from crippling, since white South Africa can freely supply itself with weapons of every kind from many other countries (notably as it happens, from France and West Germany). But the British ban is also a statement of principle of its kind, and it is one, moreover, which the South African government finds irritating and even painful.

The first thing, therefore, is to ensure that these sanctions and this ban are not allowed to disappear. That may be called defensive action by those who want to help the liberation movements of Africa. Such action will become urgent if the next general election should return a Tory government; it will remain necessary action if a Labour government comes back. Linked to it, in any case, there is the need for forward action designed to tighten sanctions and extend the arms ban. This should, of course, be international action, especially in relation to France and West Germany, at present the worst offenders on the arms-and-sanctions front.

On the wider point of capital inflows into South Africa, Rhodesia and Portugal, there is likewise urgent need for more pressure, at least to reduce the size and frequency of these inflows. In this respect one may note that pressure of this kind helped in 1969 to cause the withdrawal of the Swedish ASEA engineering corporation from participation in the Cabora Bassa (Mozambique) dam project—a project aimed at greatly strengthening the colonial economy of the Portuguese in Mozambique as well as the industrial structure of South Africa; and that ASEA’s withdrawal led more or less directly to withdrawal from the same project by Britain’s General Electric Corporation.

It remains that Portugal forms the weakest link in the chain of new imperialism that is now taking shape in southern and even in central Africa. Yet this, strangely, is the point at which least has been done in Britain or anywhere else in the West. The established weeklies of the British Left have had almost nothing so say on the subject; only in
1969 did the echoes of those long and certainly heroic wars of liberation in Portuguese Africa begin at last to break through Salazar’s “wall of silence” and reach the ears of radical assemblies. This lack of interest appeared the more surprising at a time, such as the second half of the 1960s, when the whole subject of guerrilla insurrection took fire from Cuban and Guevarist examples. Sadly, though, so it was. Even when outstandingly successful, as very clearly in Guiné, these African struggles have passed practically without notice.

It could not be said, in trying to explain this, that the rest of Europe (or the United States) was not involved. A close examination of the military aid given by NATO powers to the Portuguese dictatorship, for the purposes of colonial war in Africa, has lately appeared in Holland, though conveniently in the English language. This shows in commanding detail just how continuously these powers have supplied Salazar, all through the 1960s, with fighters, bombers, transport aircraft and military helicopters, with napalm and other munitions of mass destruction, with naval frigates and radar equipment, even with hospitalization of Portuguese casualties; and all this it shows from the evidence of "respectable” NATO or NATO-minded publications and journals. All this was known, or could readily be known (as the sources of the Dutch publication make clear). Yet barely a word of protest has been raised in Britain since 1961, when Prime Minister Macmillan soothed the Labour Opposition with a statement that British military supplies were going to Portugal upon an understanding that they should not be used in Africa. The West Germans impose the same understanding. The Portuguese régime has got round it, as with the British prohibition, simply by replying that Portuguese Africa is organically part of the motherland. This, too, has been no secret. Even today we are suavely told that the British government (and the others) are only doing their bit for their trusty NATO ally on the east Atlantic shore. It is a strange "bit" to be doing at this time, even within the frame of NATO argumentation. For the admitted military position today is that the whole of Portugal’s 180,000 men in all arms are now committed to colonial warfare in Angola, Guiné and Mozambique, save for one understrength division and slender base establishments retained in Portugal itself. Who is defending whom, and for what purposes?

There is clearly a lot of ground for useful action here, whether in aid of democracy in Portugal or of Portuguese decolonization in Africa. There is just as clearly a lot of other useful ground for those who see the further liberation of Africa as a vital part of their own concerns and social convictions. So far as I know, not a penny of British aid in cash or in kind has so far gone to the liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies, although these movements des-
perately need medical supplies, canned milk or other portable foods, textiles for the clothing of their people in liberated zones, and cash with which to buy these things. Of all the comfortable peoples of the west, only the Swedes have acted here. In 1969 the Swedish Social Democratic Party gave recognition to the PAIGC and its companion movements by inviting their representatives to the Party's congress in Stockholm. Meanwhile, the Swedish government gives public aid in cash or kind to the PAIGC (Guiné) and to FRELIMO (Mozambique), whether for educational or other civilian purposes within the liberated zones, and so do Swedish student groups. (Even by 1968, one of these groups had sent surgical X-Ray equipment to the PAIGC). Could not the British Left at least now make a start in the same direction?

NOTES

G. Arrighi and J. S. Saul, "Nationalism and Revolution in Sub-Saharan Africa", *Socialist Register* 1969: e.g. p. 174. Allowing myself some friendly criticisms of this paper, I would like at the same time to applaud its generally stimulating and valuable approach and argument.


3. As argued, for example, in my *Which Way Africa?* (Penguin African Library, revised edn. 1967).


*Cf. Which May Africa?*, chs. 10 and 11.


10. S. J. Bosgra and Chr. van Krimpen, *Portugal and NATO*: Angola Comité, Klarenburg 253, Amsterdam, price 3s. plus postage.