Civil Society and Democratisation in Francophone Africa

by CÉLESTIN MONGA*

WHEN analysing the implosion of political space and the rupture of social stability which has characterised the course of African history in recent years, there has too often been a tendency to focus attention on institutions, structures, and politicans. Whilst these are obviously important, such an approach tends to obscure the groundswell of new and yet barely understood social changes. Yet given that the 'politicians' seem unable to advance the process in which so many people have invested so much, many observers feel the need to explore alternative sources of dynamism. This is largely the reason for the current interest in the notion of 'civil society' which has recently become fashionable in the often cloistered world of African studies.

One of the first difficulties with such new terminology is determining exactly what it means. Whilst there is evidently a need to examine the nature and sphere of political activities in Africa, any attempt to define the forces rather hastily grouped together under the label 'civil society' appears problematic and doomed to failure. This is principally due to the diversity of political situations, and the inherent inadequacy of using tools designed for understanding the workings of western democracies to analyse the situation elsewhere in the world. This raises the general problem arising from the transfer of sociological concepts across space and time.[1]

Yet an attempt to define civil society is essential if our study of recent political movements in Africa is to be more than a superficial

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[1] The difficuties experienced in using the term 'civil society' in applied research are not restricted to Africanists. The history of the concept is littered with queries and scepticisms as confirmed by the following useful surveys: Adam Ferguson, *Essai sur l'histoire de la société civile* (Paris, 1992), translated from the English version (Edinburgh, 1986), and John Keane (ed.), *Civil Society and the State: new European perspectives* (London, 1988). See also the philosophic synthesis of H. Gourdon, 'Trois comptines à propos de la société civile', in Michel Camau (ed.), *Changements politiques au Maghreb* (Paris, 1991), pp. 191–205.

commentary. We are now witnessing a complete transformation of the conditions in which politics emerge, not least because new popular ambitions have created an upsurge in the aspirations and dreams cherished by Africans. This has manifested itself in the movements of social protest which appear to have been amplified by the huge challenges posed by this *fin de siècle*. Africans sense these opportunities all the more acutely as they have fewer economic resources than others with which to assure the survival of their species in the emerging world order. New social frontiers are being traced, new networks of solidarity established, new mentalities are taking shape. Values believed to be lost have reappeared, supplanting and replacing the ideologies whose limits have been exposed by 30 years of single-party rule. In this flux we are witnessing a diversification of political activities: pressure groups emerge from the shadows, lobbies suddenly spring into broad daylight, without anyone really knowing either the main actors or their ambitions, let alone their scope for action.

INFORMAL POLITICAL MARKETS

An empirical examination of the socio-political situation of the bulk of the countries caught up in this democratic vortex reveals the emergence of new social mechanisms, and the discovery of what might properly be called 'public opinion'. People are becoming more and more aware of belonging to specific, defined groups, and increasingly express the desire that their interests should be organised in both civil and political arenas. From political courtiers to financial marabouts, from unemployed youths of the suburbs to the intellectual and religious élites, right across the political spectrum there is hardly a social group which has not felt the need for its members to communally articulate their daily concerns.

For example, in both public and private companies the void due to the absence of structures of collective organisation – notably unions, works committees, employers associations – is being filled by a multiplicity of increasingly dynamic informal groupings, even if these are often established along Weberian lines of sex, age, kinship, and religion. For Africans this is a way of reclaiming the right of self-expression, all too long confiscated by the official institutions of power. In establishing themselves as full participants in the so-called 'political game', these groups expand the arena of association, stealthily influencing the ongoing multi-faceted transformation. Through their

ability to blur the rules of the game they represent a disruptive force in the socio-political environment, what Ilya Prigogine would call a *structure dissipative*.[2]

This upsurge of informal groupings has the potential to overturn not just the existing political system, but also the surrounding moral order – always assuming that such a thing exists. The emergence of such dominant players on the national stage brings both virtues and the risk of distortions. Their strength lies in the fact that their collective conscience is greater and sharper than the simple sum of the citizens who participate. Many of the new organisations are rooted in a popular base, supporters are recruited from the lower classes, they are flexible in their operations, and efficient in their lobbying. The impact of their presence means that suddenly the political game has become even more complex.

CENTRIFUGAL FORCES AND PROCESSES OF EXCLUSION

Whilst obviously welcoming the fact that more of the population are speaking out on major issues, a close look at the behaviour of the principal actors raises a series of worrying questions. Beyond the obvious risks inherent in new movements, such as leaders rapidly stagnating and/or settling into hierarchical systems, one must ask how these social structures, until recently unknown, will fit into the 'national project' of each country, and whether both their ideas and actions will draw them into, or distance them from, the official discourse. Are they centrifugal forces which will stimulate and enhance the construction of the state, or will they be swept into the centralising tendency and simply squabble over the remains of the ruined state? Are they aiming to embody the earnest proclamations of democracy, or to establish alternative spiritual values and impose radically different modes of social exclusion and violence? In addition, one must ask if their tendency to refer to 'tradition' has any substance.

Researchers face difficulties when confronted by so many changes. The numerous reforms undertaken in the name of political and economic adjustment, the fresh and diverse modes of producing

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[2] See Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Entre le temps et l'éternité* (Paris, 1988), and Ilya Prigogine and Grégoire Nicolis, *Exploring Complexity: an introduction* (New York, 1989). Also worth mentioning is the retrospective of James Gleick, *La Théorie du chaos* (Paris, 1989), which synthesises the numerous attempts to use the methodology and theories of physical sciences in the social sciences.

freedom,[3] and the intense social creativity, have generated new cultural phenomena and the ballooning of the informal economy. Analysts thus have first to grapple with the problem of precisely defining civil society, second to interpret the significance of the diverse groups that have emerged, and above all to offer a reading of the changes which will help to identify and evaluate the scale of the current dynamic for democratisation.[4]

Here I present some elements of a study based on the premise that most political authorities in Africa do not really have a grip on the actual mechanisms of society. I suggest that rather than historical, institutional, or economic factors, it is above all the psychological and emotional aspects of everyday life which determined the main social phenomena that are continuing to be experienced. Needless-to-say, the work of others has long demonstrated the importance of the subconscious in the psychology of social groups in general.[5] My own findings highlight the emotional dimensions of the protest movements which have been – and, often, still are – shaking Africa's political stage. I believe that these cannot be understood unless seen within the perspective of what might be termed a form of 'anthropology of anger'. This article is therefore a reflection of cumulative frustrations as well as an analysis of collective modes of expression and discontent, including the informal attempts made to use them as vehicles for political action.

HOW TO DEFINE A PHANTOM CONCEPT

There is little doubt that African civil society cannot be fully comprehended let alone assessed by the classic instruments of analysis. Most institutions which make up society cannot be compared to those which we see working in Europe, where elected local, regional, and national bodies meet regularly to decide policy and choose leaders. In the African case the leadership, membership, and functioning of such structures are often shrouded in mystery.

Of course, most associations have a constitution that provides, *inter alia*, information about their aims, membership, finance, and internal

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[3] See Célestin Monga, 'L'Émergence de nouveaux modes de production démocratique en Africa noire', in *Afrique 2000: revue africaine de la politique internationale* (Geneva), 7, October–December 1990, pp. 111–25.

[4] The notion of 'dynamism' is taken from the theory which tries to analyse psychological principles of change. See Kurt Lewin, *Resolving Social Conflicts* (New York, 1948), as well as G. N. Fischer, *La Dynamique du social: violence, pouvoir, changement* (Paris, 1993).

[5] See, for example, Gustave Le Bon, *La Psychologie des foules* (1895; Paris, 1963), and Gabriel Tarde, *L'Opinion et la foule* (Paris, 1901).

rules. In reality the officers are not infrequently changed to suit the circumstances, particularly as there are often no selection procedures. Although the decisions taken can have a decisive effect on society, the most important meetings happen only irregularly, they have no formal agenda, and are held in closed sessions, frequently in secret locations. The fact is that we cannot define a specific African civil society without reference to either its peculiarities or the context in which it has emerged.

1. *Inflation of Politics and the Civic 'Deficit'*

Thirty years of authoritarian rule have forged a concept of indiscipline as a method of popular resistance. In order to survive and resist laws and rules judged to be antiquated, people have had to resort to the treasury of their imagination. Given that life is one long fight against the state, inventiveness has gradually conspired to craftily defy everything which symbolises public authority. Once politics has been 'opened up', any collective recalcitrance could only lead to a profound civic deficit. Decrees cannot change overnight patterns of behaviour patiently refined during many decades of quasi-dictatorship.

That the existing structures of social management are inefficient is obvious to all observers; in general, it was not political parties which initiated the protests currently being heard across the continent. With very few exceptions, trade unions, often the most easily organised of mass movements, did not play a determining rôle in the course of events.[6] Although those content to act as a mouth-piece for the ruling single party were hardly likely to oppose the status quo, violent social disturbances frequently forced the established authorities to climb down and triggered a process of democratisation. This is proof that, despite apathy from opposition parties and unions, African societies were able to generate their own networks of communication and forums for discussion within which it was possible to express collective fears and dreams. For me the term 'civil society' refers to those birthplaces where the ambitions of social groups have created the means of generating additional freedom and justice.

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[6] This is not true for the countries of North Africa, where unions have always been very active. They also played a key rôle in the evolution of politics in the Congo and Southern Africa between 1989 and 1990, but have had virtually no presence in Cameroon, Central African Republic, or Mali.

2. *Geographic Variables*

Any definition of civil society is likely to be different on opposing sides of the Sahara since from a political point of view the problems are not identical. Sociologists in the Maghreb, for example, include only 'the parties and associations which, despite their divergences of opinion on many issues, share the same values of human rights and individual freedoms'.[7] Such a definition excludes movements laying claim to fundamentalist Islam, even if they have a dominant rôle in the socio-political plan.

South of the Sahara things are rather different. The Mullahs do not, at least for the moment, have a determining rôle on the course of events, although this statement needs qualifying. The mobilising potential of religious communities is clear in Nigeria, where the smallest clash between their members may result in hundreds of deaths. The chaotic and violent history of building a mosque in Cameroon during 1991 revealed the existence of a well established 'Muslim force' in the capital. In Senegal the chief of the Mouride community has for many years dominated the country's business affairs.[8] Nevertheless, religious organisations capable of influencing politics as much as the Islamic movements in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, or Morocco do not yet exist in Nigeria, Cameroon, or Senegal.

This is why my definition of civil society in sub-Saharan Africa incorporates the churches and religious movements which, up until now, have contributed in their own way to the birth of democratic power in their countries. It includes all organisations and individuals whose actions have helped to amplify the affirmations of social identity and the rights of citizenship, often in opposition to those in power whose natural tendency is to repress such identities and rights. It obviously does not exclude the interactions that take place between the state, the political parties, and leading personalities. In a nutshell, civil society in Africa is formed by all those who are able to manage and steer communal anger.

I am well aware that I shall not escape the criticism of those who reject the notion of civil society in states which are not 'democratic' in the western sense of that term, like the Tunisian sociologist Mohammed

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[7] A. Zghal, 'Le Concept de société civile et la transition vers le multipartisme', in Camau (ed.), op. cit. p. 211. For a good understanding of the fears of Maghrebian intellectuals on this issue, see the lively pamphlet by the Algerian Rachid Mimouni, *De la Barbarie en général et de l'intégrisme en particulier* (Paris, 1992), as well as Rachid Boudjedra, *FIS de la haine* (Paris, 1992).

[8] See Moriba Magassouba, *L'Islam au Sénégal: demain les mollahs?* (Paris, 1985).

Kerrou.[9] Whilst my formulation of the concept differs significantly from the eighteenth-century European definition, it has the advantage of clearly emphasising the significance of historicity, the capacity of African societies to evolve within their own, unique trajectory.[10]

PREPONDERANT RÔLE, MYSTERIOUS ORGANISATION

The opening up of politics in Africa has prompted a quasi-anarchic multiplication of parties. Yet in almost all countries the new leaders have almost immediately revealed their limitations. Thus, to avoid running the risk of being deprived of 'their' democratisation, society has had to invent alternative structures to manage and express its dissatisfaction.

1. *The Discrepancy between Political Demand and Supply*

The weakening of authoritarian régimes has triggered an implosion of politics and an extraordinary inflation of individuals claiming to be the leaders of so many new parties: 19 were legalised in the space of just a few months in the Central African Republic, 27 in Gabon, 70 in Cameroon, over 200 in Zaïre. This turmoil is simply a response to the growing demand for representation in each country. But these parties generally have neither a clearly defined programme, nor any effective organisation. Their capacity to make an impact on the political stage and to promote democratic change seems still limited. The multiplication of parties has not increased the civil rights of ordinary citizens. Public discourse is still uni-dimensional because too many leaders are content just to proclaim slogans and pledges of faith during the meetings to which people flock in the hope of hearing real solutions to their daily hardships.[11]

Most embryonic organisations are almost inevitably characterised by a lack of trained cadres and strategies. Faced with many grievances

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[9] Mohammed Kerrou, 'À Propos de la notion de société civile', in *Outrouhat* (Tunis), 15, 1989, pp. 26–9.

[10] Here I mean 'historicity' in the sense that the ideas of civil society were used by Antonio Gramsci to analyse the specificity of the totalitarian parties of Western Europe after World War I and the victory of the Russian Communist Party.

[11] This partially explains the fact that whilst the demonstrations organised by opposition parties in Abidjan and Douala in 1990 and 1991 attracted hundreds of thousands, they were attended by only tens of thousands in 1992. Such indications, although still provisional, suggest real disenchantment.

and demands from poor social groups, the supply of ideas from political leaders has remained limited. This is the source of the widespread disillusionment with politics, and the inversely proportional eruption of alternative groupings through which large segments of the population try to express their views and demands.

2. *Reappropriating Symbolic Goods*

Given the prevailing circumstances it is not surprising that public discontent manifests itself in terms of anger. The proliferation of privately owned newspapers and magazines, and especially efforts to create independent trade unions, co-operatives, professional bodies, youth organisations, and academic groups, all serve to promote the demand for rights that conventional organs and institutions seem unable to understand or satisfy.

Everywhere, the emerging civil society thus tends to be self-managing as its leaders attempt to re-kindle social consciences. Four influential groups have emerged in this rôle: (i) the students in all countries, who have been at the forefront of protest; (ii) the clergy (notably in Benin, Gabon, Mali, and Zaïre); (iii) the lawyers (Algeria, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Mali, Togo, and Tunisia); and (iv) the intellectuals and journalists (Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, and Zambia). Their commitment to the democratic struggle has served as a catalyst to amplify the collective dream.[12] It is clear from what is said and done that one of their principal demands concerns the symbolic 'commodities' of recognition and dignity.

The leaders of these new social groups are motivated by a thirst to express themselves, to participate and be represented in the crucial cabals in order to influence the choices made by the politicians. Once achieved, they demand their share of the 'national cake', although this is not always their main aim. Occasionally, their links with elements of the political class cast suspicion on their position, and hence in the minds of some they are simply assimilated into the opposition movements, lending a partisan connotation to their struggle to re-establish certain values. In Mali, Togo, and Cameroon, the decision by human rights organisations to join anti-government alliances means that their leaders have become simply frustrated politicians.

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[12] Personalities such as Monsignori Ernest Kombo (Congo), Laurent Mossengo (Zaïre), Christian Tumi (Cameroon), barristers Demba Diallo (Mali), Nicolas Tiangaye (Central African Republic), Bernard Muna and Charles Tchougang (Cameroon) have all become familiar to those who follow political news from Africa.

It is difficult to make categorical judgements about what is happening in Africa. Does an association designed to defend human rights compromise its critical stance by supporting one or more opposition parties in the struggle against an authoritarian power? Should it remain always 'neutral' to conserve its impartiality? A similar question applies to the private press. On the pretext of 'objectivity', should rulers whose illegitimacy is well established be treated in the same manner as opponents who are struggling to change their country?

3. *The Discovery of New Means of Communication*

In practice the leaders of the most active elements of civil society could not afford to dither too long over such existentialist questions. Having decided not to wait for international public opinion to come to their rescue, they set themselves up in opposition in each country, establishing informal channels of information to get their message across to the people.

In fact they did not really have a choice. Access to public media in Africa always was, and still is, denied to any group challenging the existing authorities. Professional associations and student groups, for example, knew that it would be dangerous to criticise those in power, if not impossible in state-owned TV, radio, and publications. In most countries the press laws either implicitly or explicitly allow censorship – perhaps by a paragraph surreptitiously introduced into the legislation adopted by the national assembly, or by a pro-régime committee installed in the offices of those printing newspapers. Necessity is the mother of invention, and thus 'killing two birds with one stone' became a preoccupation for those who simultaneously wished to earn money whilst discreetly undermining the authorities that they at best half-heartedly support.[13]

The re-establishment of oral communication in the political arena should be noted, whether by word of mouth and/or *radio trottoir*. Numerous organisations in Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Cameroon, for example, have used the permanent ebb and flow of people between

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[13] In francophone Africa a popular newspaper normally sold at 200 CFA francs may fetch 500–2,000 on the black market. Hence the clear temptation, not least in any country where the average monthly pay of a policeman is around 70,000 CFA francs, to make ends meet at the end of the month by organising the illegal sales of certain publications, especially if no record has been kept of the number seized.

large towns and villages as a means of effectively distributing their
critical views and messages. Orders for strikes have been transmitted
from one area to another by family visits and day trips to the rural
areas. Word of mouth can be distinguished from rumour by the fact
that the information is generally precise and of an unusual specificness.
Such modes of expression, therefore, have an authority which allows
the emerging civil society to free itself from the shackles of official
propaganda and to define the image of its own evolution.

IS CIVIL SOCIETY CIVILISED?

Many countries have witnessed both the intensity of popular wrath
in Africa during recent years, as well as the desire of emerging social
institutions to actively direct the sense of public frustration. Their
absence of fear and growing dynamism has established them as forces
with whom the public authorities are obliged to talk, rendering
obsolete the remarks of John Dunn in the late 1970s that there is

good reason to see the degree of internal dominance of the state power as a
product of the relative insubstantiality of civil society in these [West African]
countries, the limited degree of viable and enduring institutionalization of
local social forces outside the sphere of the state.[14]

The aim of the new stakeholders is to assume control of the collective
anger in order to intensify the momentum for political change. This
poses numerous problems, notably that the more 'voluntarist' view of
the relationship between fragile or even moribund states and their
societies encourages the emergence of rival factions and rebellious
leaders. One can also question the efficiency and goals of new
groupings whose actions are still unclear. Having abruptly established
themselves as the driving force behind democratisation they suddenly
find themselves centre stage. In the process, they have altered the
structures of civil society, changing the sociological space in a manner
which means that each organisation requires further study. Other
issues worth investigating are the perverse effects of the extraordinarily
large scope for action that various groups have created for themselves.
On what basis do they form alliances and promote solidarity, and how
do they determine their objectives?

[14] John Dunn, 'Comparing West African States', in Dunn (ed.), *West African States: failure and
promise. A Study in Comparative Politics* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 15. For a more nuanced analysis, see
Peter Lewis, 'Political Transition and the Dilemma of Civil Society in Africa', in *Journal of
International Affairs* (New York), 27, 1, Summer 1992, pp. 31–54.

1. *The Standards of Solidarity*

What is the best way to analyse the civil society that is developing in Africa? Antonio Gramsci suggested a method of evaluating three distinct dimensions: (i) the organisation, (ii) the normative space, and (iii) the 'private' nature of the groups involved in the process.[15]

(i) *The organisation*

Whether it be trade unionists, journalists, intellectuals, students, or the unemployed, many in Africa today are no longer content to simply wear the labels of social origins, tribe, or age. Rather, they increasingly choose to adhere to a particular social group according to individual ideas of solidarity based in religious, philosophical, or spiritual criteria. It is in this way that numerous popular religious organisations, active notably amongst urban youth, are now able to recruit members from throughout society and not just from one segment or tribe, as was the case two or three decades ago. However, it must be admitted that this is a slow process, as well as not being true everywhere. Nor does it necessarily yet represent a radical change in the way in which Africans themselves participate in associations, since many still act in accordance with 'traditional' forms of solidarity.

(ii) *The normative space*

Whereas socio-professional bodies tend to disregard the primary affiliations of their members, even within each social class, these are reinforced by organisations with an ethnic or regional basis. Nevertheless, they all attempt to inculcate a sense of communal solidarity in place of individual identity, which hitherto seems to have been the guiding principle for the majority of citizens. Some associations appear to view membership of 'tribes' and/or parties as aiding the creation of conditions for their more effective rôle in society. This tendency is worrying, particularly for those who agree with Jürgen Habermas that the democratic process is linked to the ability to free ourselves from the dictatorship of groups, be they family, ethnic, or religiously based, and that access to freedom is proportionally linked to the affirmation of a certain form of individualism, because 'the new conflicts do not arise

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[15] Antonio Gramsci, *Gramsci dans le texte* (Paris, 1977), pp. 606–7.

from problems of redistribution but from questions which are linked to the very grammar of forms of life'.[16]

One can question the validity of the 'moral' which governs the ambition of the formers of opinion in the new social groups. In many countries powerful associations affirm openly their tribalist affiliations in the name of ethnic groups, which they claim have been marginalised in the distribution of the 'national cake'.[17]

(iii) *The private nature of civil society*

The drive to create voluntary organisations does not stem from the so-called 'crisis' in the African state, notably the latter's inability to manage society, as some scholars have suggested.[18] Quite the opposite, the popular will to create freedom of space for new groups is an attempt to fill the social void which the absence of the state represents for so many of the inhabitants.

2. *Choosing a Framework of Analysis*

Apart from looking at the operation of civil society in Africa, we need to analyse the way in which opinions and decisions are made within this emerging entity. The motivations underlying the choice of a particular set of beliefs and references follow a fairly subtle evolution. Collective social representations – the way in which most Africans re-appropriate daily events by translating them into common sense terms – transcend individual subjectivity, and are imposed on each member of the community as an inescapable constraint. This occurs all the more easily for populations in revolt because of the injustices which they have experienced, and strengthens the tendency to return to the 'tribe' as a point of reference, which naturally benefits from the situation by de-emphasising the rôle of the individual.

Impatient observers may feel that tribalism is simultaneously both an imperative of civil society and a key to its understanding. In reality, most men and women interpret issues in daily life in diverse ways. The

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[16] Jürgen Habermas, *Théorie de l'agir communicationnel*, Vol. 2, *Pour une critique de la raison fonctionnaliste* (Paris, 1987), p. 432.

[17] A highly instructive survey is given in the collection *Le Cameroun éclate? Une Anthologie des revendications ethniques* (Yaoundé, 1992), edited by the research group known as the *Collectif Changer le Cameroun*.

[18] Noably J.-Y. Thériault, 'La Société civile est-elle démocratique?', in Gérard Boismenu, Pierre Hamel, and Georges Labica (eds.), *Les Formes modernes de la démocratie* (Paris and Montreal, 1992), p. 69. See also, Alberto Melucci, 'The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Movements', in *Social Research* (New York), 52, 4, 1985, pp. 789–816.

'success' of the constraints operating within sub-Saharan social organisations can be explained by the fact that representations have both a psychic and a cognitive structure having been theorised by the leading personalities of each group. Evidently this is true even if the *à priori* logic rests on a purely imaginary base.

This does not mean to say that the choice of a cognitive framework is necessarily an act imposed by the groups to which people belong. Like anywhere else, their fundamental motivation in Africa is the expansion of individual interests. The ideas articulated by pressure groups have the possibility of taking root in the collective imagination if they obey this imperative.[19] Citizens take decisions on the basis of the quality of their information and ability to manage anxiety. They will either follow or disobey the orders of their social group according to the intensity of their anger. Where tribalism and xenophobia became the official ideologies of certain factions, their fear of others will lead to troops being mobilised, whether they want to carve out an electoral domain, to govern, or to maintain themselves in power. The structures of civil society are particularly receptive to leaders who adopt slogans in line with populist illusions. In Africa, the misery for so long suffered by ordinary citizens tends to increase society's receptiveness to such ideas.

All the above observations raise legitimate concerns. Is the form of civil society currently being constructed in Africa democratic? Are its leaders motivated by ethical ambitions or by a desire for revenge against the state and those elements of society accused of not taking into account the interests they represent? Do they know how to adapt their demands to the socio-economic issues and imperatives of the market economy? Will they abide by the rules of the political game if these legitimate their marginalisation and appear 'unfavourable' to certain groups?

HOW TO DEAL WITH THE PROCESS OF SOCIAL FRAGMENTATION

The theoretical issues raised by the on-going socio-political adjustments are of a similar magnitude to the threats to the future stability and viability of each African state posed by the anarchic emergence of an ill-defined civil society. Faced with the weakening of

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[19] These processes, termed by some as 'objectivisation' or 'anchoring', are well described by Verena Aebischer and D. Oberlé, *Le Groupe en psychologie sociale* (Paris, 1990).

law and order and a decaying state, the fragmentation of society due to the rise of tribalism and regionalism, and the absence of politicians with clear plans, African populations tend to react by rejecting all forms of authority. After decades of resistance to the brutalities of power, people's behaviour has come to be inspired primarily by their personal interests. This autistic tendency, which marks the end of unanimity, is simultaneously welcomed and worrying; although it frees the citizen from group discipline which we know can be detestable, it legitimises a private universe as the principal reference point for each and every social leader.[20]

How should this problem be studied? The risk of barbarism, which African civil society carries as a parasite, could interfere negatively in the on-going reappropriation of freedom. On this precise point, how can the West assist the process of democratic construction in Africa?

1. *Issues of Conceptualisation*

In order to react positively to current political developments we have first to decipher the notion of civil duty, or *socialité*. Hence the need to presuppose that civil society is sufficiently strong to contain and channel its collective anger, and that it is desirable to steer the socialisation of the state towards some kind of optimal equilibrium. This means taking a closer look into the issues raised by the way civil society works in Africa today, notably the extent to which many policy-makers now tend to adjust their decisions according to the degree of legitimacy enjoyed by certain groups in each country.[21]

Larry Diamond has suggested an interesting framework for assessing what he calls the ten democratic functions of civil society.[22] The theoretical considerations emphasised in his analysis include the educational virtues of a dynamic civil society, the numerous advantages of social mobilisation and participation, the adoption of transparent rules in the 'political game', and the recognition and institutionalisation of 'lobbies', which means the emergence of a new type of

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[20] Authors who have examined this issue, which in Europe is one of the traits of post-modernity, include Pierre Rosanvallon, *La Crise de l'État-providence* (Paris, 1981); Gérard Mendel, *Cinquante-quatre millions d'individus sans appartenance* (Paris, 1983); and Gilles Lipovestky, *L'Ère du vide* (Paris, 1983). For a synthesis of such ideas, see Lizette Jalbert, 'L'État ancré ou les frontières de la démocratie', in Boismenu, Hamel, and Labica (eds.), op. cit.

[21] See Célestin Monga, 'La Problématique de la légitimité collective an Afrique noire', Conference on 'Droits de la personne et droit des groupes', Université d'Avignon, France, November 1994.

[22] Larry Diamond, 'Rethinking Civil Society: toward democratic consolidation', in *Journal of Democracy* (Baltimore), 5, 3, July 1994, pp. 4–17.

political culture focusing on co-operation, bargaining, and accommodation, rather than conflict and violence.

However, in order to fully comprehend the significance and implications of the emergence of civil society in Africa, we must also study a number of disturbing developments. The first is the cult of nihilism and cynicism which is a feature of many religious and civic groups: indeed, in countries where their protagonists are primarily animated with revenge and anger, the dissemination of despair and violence seems to be the main feature of informal political markets. In Senegal, Mali, and Cameroon, for example, some of the most popular slogans used by the new social leaders have to do with organising public trials of those who were in charge of the country since independence – in other words, they are promoting retaliation, punishment, and various witch-hunts, or *chasse aux sorcières*. Such discourse sets a negative tone for the political debate, not least by limiting the type of issues which are brought to the forefront.

The second major threat stems from the informalisation of the political markets. Indeed, it is clear that some of the most vocal trade unionists and civil rights activists in francophone Africa have taken advantage of the relative freedom which they have as 'social leaders' to engage in subtle strategies of political entrepreneurship. Given the inflexible structures of government and administration in most of these countries, as well as the fact that political parties are increasingly mistrusted by the general public, many mysterious associations have been created by people who are really running for office. Their leaders simply argue that they have found a way of circumventing the current renewal of authoritarianism since those in power are much less willing to crack down on a 'human rights league' than on a political party.

A third issue has to do with the political rôle assigned to international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In Senegal, for instance, Oxfam has become so powerful in many areas that one cannot dismiss the need for its approach to be closely scrutinised, regardless of the level of the staff's commitment to ethics. I do not pretend that there is always a hidden agenda behind their actions; but it would be naïve to believe that there is no political price to be paid for the 'charity business' in Africa.

2. *Policy Recommendations*

For any given country, the policy recommendations emerging from my analysis can be classified as follows:

(i) *Restoring the idea of a common destiny*

The need to restore hope and the sense of a common destiny in the heart of people who hardly believe in the relevance of any kind of public authority is obvious. The aim must be to try to convert what currently appears as violent collective anger against the state into a source of energy for a more dynamic process of social engineering. The veritable 'uprising' of civil society as the key political event of the past five years has been due to the failure of governments to provide a moral foundation for the principle of 'togetherness'. While disillusion about the goals of the nation-state is not an issue *per se*, it is necessary to emphasise the very basic idea that people are bound to live together, and that any policy which ignores that premise is likely to lead to a 'no win–win' situation, and possible bloodshed. So, it is urgent to reinforce the basic message that the members of all groupings in any given country share the same destiny, regardless of their tribe, status, or religion. It may sound obvious, but past and on-going tragedies in Africa remind us of the necessity to insist on some banal truths. Concretely, this can be done through very well-designed communication strategies.

(ii) *Building a better leadership*

There is an urgent need for new leaders committed to pursuing ethical values who are strong, responsible, and unselfish. Their paucity, so apparent in recent events throughout the continent, requires that we look beyond the élites that recycle the same old tactics, using ethnicity and violence as their main political tools. To paraphrase Cornel West, Africa needs leaders who can situate themselves within the larger historical narrative of the continent, grasp the complex dynamics of its peoplehood, and imagine a future grounded in the best of its past, yet who are attuned to the frightening obstacles ahead.[23] 'Quality leadership is neither the product of one great individual nor the result of odd historical events. Rather, it comes from deeply bred traditions and communities that shape and mold talented and gifted persons.'[24] The new leaders must place their trust in today's grass-roots initiatives and traditional African philosophy that highlights democratic accountability, and perceives negotiation as a fair and honourable way of making decisions.

[23] Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston, 1993), p. 7.   [24] Ibid. p. 37.

(iii) *Expanding social capital beyond geographic borders*

The literature on African civil society usually emphasises the necessity of strengthening civic communities by supporting NGOs, and by providing them with various forms of aid. But one must go beyond such requests. A much more powerful way of tackling the pervasive issue of urban nihilism, for example, and of encouraging the feeling and reality of 'brotherhood', would be to build links not only within but also among various social groups, and across countries. The term 'social capital' has been used by some authors when referring to 'features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions'.[25] In fact, in the case of most African countries, there is little or no lack of such social capital. The problem is its limited scope in the absence of formal or informal links between the various components of civil society. Expanding the network of existing groups beyond their geographic and regional limits means that more people with similar interests and concerns can be connected, not least so that they can perceive how similar are their fears and dreams.

(iv) *Linking civil society and the legislature*

It is essential that the marginalised social groups – from which the new organisations are currently attracting support – be gradually eased out of their ghettos. The equilibrium necessary for the functioning of political institutions cannot be maintained unless full democratic citizenship is restored to all those who feel marginalised. This raises the problem of the linkages between economics, politics, and society.[26] Social stability cannot be established as long as political gains are not accompanied by parallel economic improvements. In particular, these must meet the basic needs of the poorest sections of society who often form the majority. New bodies may need to be created to inculcate a moral ethos into the leadership of the nascent social groups.

A new political apparatus must limit the potential for conflict between the diverse groups of civil society, and constructive links need

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[25] Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Y. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: civil traditions in modern Italy* (Princeton, 1993), p. 167. The concept of 'social capital' was presented by Glenn Loury, 'A Dynamic Theory of Racial Income Differences', in P. A. Wallace and A. Le Mund (eds.), *Women, Minorities, and Employment Discrimination* (Lexington, MA, 1977).

[26] Researchers have increasingly agreed about the significance of such tripartite linkages. See Claude Lefort, *L'Invention démocratique* (Paris, 1981), and Donald Rothchild and Naomi Chazan (eds.), *The Precarious Balance: state and society in Africa* (Boulder and London, 1988).

to be established with the legislature. There are numerous judicial ways in which this might be achieved. The most influential socio-political organisations could, for example, be directly represented in parliament. Even those societies that operate secretly in the streets could be given opportunities to express their views about laws and rules drafted by the régime in power. This would be sensitive given the determinant rôle which such groups have always played, notably during the resistance to all forms of colonialism, as well as during the struggle to create the state in Africa.[27]

(v) *Adopting a new scale of interests*

The rupture of social bonds currently underway is likely to continue. Everyone's heightened awareness of their own personal interests could hasten the erosion of the primary family, ethnic, and regional ties which have been dominant until now. Already in some places one can see what has been called 'the paradigm of anticipated socialization', according to which individuals tend to assume the values and behaviour of the groups to which they aspire to belong, rather than those to which they are assumed to belong.[28] The shift in the scale of values against which Africans measure their interests implies the demolition of the powerful myth of the 'tribe' or 'ethnic group' as the dominant social fact.[29]

Numerous studies have demonstrated that the nature of the bonds between state and society, what some writers have called 'penetrative interdependence', is one of the key characteristics of democratic countries.[30] A number of analyses have established the existence of a correlation between the phenomenon of the state's penetration of society and the proportion of the state budget allocated to social spending. Yet this observation is of little or no use in Africa, where macro-economic aggregates do not have the same meaning and social problems are very different. Although the scale of public spending allocated to 'social needs' might increase substantially, the state

[27] Marc Augé, *Génie du paganisme* (Paris, 1982), especially ch. 7, 'Signes du corps, sens du social: sorcier imaginaire, sorcellerie symboliques', pp. 211–80, and Elikia M'Bokolo, 'Résistance et messianismes: l'Afrique centrale au XIXème siècle', in ACCT/*Présence africaine* (Paris), 1990.

[28] Robert K. Merton, *Éléments de théorie et de méthode sociologique* (Paris, 1965).

[29] Although we still need to question the authority of these terms, Jean-Loup Amselle and Elikia M'Bokolo began such a task in their excellent *Au Coeur de l'éthnie* (Paris, 1985).

[30] The term comes from Keith Banting, 'Points de vue sur l'État contemporain: introduction', in Banting (ed.), *L'État et la société: le Canada dans une optique comparative* (Ottawa, 1986), Études de la Commission royale, Vol. 31, p. 14.

simultaneously refuses to root itself in the society it is ostensibly representing.

It is small wonder that may African communities aim to 'take their revenge' on the state, and to establish only a symbolic relationship with public authorities. After having been at the mercy of the latter for so long, society now seeks a radical shift in the balance of power. This ambition is expressed in the operation of the growing number of informal groupings, and the multiple strategies of resistance to public authorities, including infiltration into areas of responsibility habitually reserved as the domain of the state. It is this which explains the fact that people in some villages and towns in Africa have never waited for governmental subsidies to build schools, roads, and other public works. Studies of social dynamics must look beneath the violent disturbances in each country, and analyse the issues which have created such collective anger.

Evidently the problem is to find an optimal equilibrium point in this process of 'socialising the state'; namely, defining limits to where society takes its revenge without completely repudiating the state, or totally stripping it of any legitimacy, as is too often the case at present. By appropriating territory normally under the control of the public authorities, civil society is locked in a struggle which, eventually, can only weaken all concerned. Take for example the fact that in virtually all countries in Africa the collection of taxes is falling because of the widespread perception of their nature. For most citizens, not paying taxes is an act of civil defiance, a way of reducing the amount of national wealth which has been corruptly salted away in Swiss banks.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

How can a reciprocal contract between the state and civil society be defined so that democratic governance in Africa is more likely? How can communal anger be steered so as to avoid its degeneration into an anarchic cacophony behind the masks of an amorphous civil society? How can the credibility of the state be re-established, providing firmer foundations for 'private' society whilst simultaneously achieving a better 'rate of democratic citizenship per person'? How can we ensure that the social rights won from the state through the struggle of non-governmental organisations and groups correspond to new political obligations for the electorate?

My hypothesis is that civil society will only acquire ethical objectives through a better educated middle class since its members are in the

forefront of those fighting for political space. Of course, their associations are still young and vary from one region to another, yet they represent those segments of the population that are most engaged in the struggle for change, and that have the greatest influence with the poorest urban and peasant households. Better information and training among targeted groups could be designed for much wider transmission, and might be the most efficient way of spreading a message of hope for all social classes.

Obviously, the efficient regulation of informal political markets cannot be resolved by theoretical analysis. Hence the need for practical suggestions aimed at reinforcing the components of civil society in Africa. It is my belief that it is not the lack of material resources which is the biggest obstacle to democratisation. Far more important than money, the sub-Saharan states need to benefit from the knowledge, experience, and *savoir-faire* of others, particularly as regards social engineering and political management. By this I mean that all the mechanisms, rules, and institutions should be dedicated to the best possible regulation of relations between the state, the market, and the community.

The social fabric of Africa has to be strengthened in a variety of ways, not least by helping the independent mass media to play a more effective rôle along the lines suggested in May 1991 by the UN/Unesco seminar for African journalists held in Windhoek.[31] Before the end of the cold war in Europe, when the Polish trade union 'Solidarity' was fighting to free the nation from the dictatorship of General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the French publishers of *Le Monde* (Paris) donated their old printing machines and associated equipment to Lech Walesa's organisation. This soon proved to be one of the most significant acts of western assistance, and the private press in a number of African countries would greatly benefit from this kind of imaginative support.

Campaigns of communication on the theme of civil rights and duties need to be arranged, with adequate funds for TV and radio programmes, as well as supporting books, pamphlets, cartoons, and advertisements. As for the journalists themselves, they would obviously gain from seminars, conferences, and courses organised by leading practitioners, both from Africa and elsewhere, who want to share their expertise and experiences.

The multiplication of human rights groups in Africa has not

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[31] See Robert Martin, 'Building Independent Mass Media in Africa', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (Cambridge), 30, 2, June 1992, pp. 331–40.

necessarily meant a better cataloguing of violations and abuses. The assorted organisations created often appear to be structures of power in the hands of certain individuals who are more concerned with personal advancement than public investigation. None of them have published precise, verified information on the violent incidents which have shaken their countries during recent years.[32] Yet in Europe there are many associations which have the necessary competence to train African human rights observers in this kind of essential task.

Other possibilities should be explored if we do not want to see the political inflation accompanying current social upheavals transformed into a deeper communal disenchantment with a wholesale loss of civil values.[33] There is no question of transferring ready-made solutions in the North to the South, but the leaders of African civil society need to be offered the means of avoiding the errors, delays, and catastrophes which have marked the democratic process in the West.

[32] See Célestin Monga, 'Computing a Democratization Index for Africa', J. F. Kennedy School Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. 1993.

[33] On political passions in Africa and risks of disenchantment, see Achille Mbembe, *Afriques indociles: Christianisme, pouvoir et État en société post-coloniale* (Paris, 1988).