

African Social Movements vs. Civil Societies in Africa?

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Social movements in sub-Saharan Africa have recently attracted renewed attention within social movement scholarship (see, for example, Ellis / van Kessel 2009, Manji / Ikin 2012, and features in journals such as *Stichproben* 2011, *Prokla* 2013, and the current issue of *FJSB*). One of the noticeable common features of many recent contributions to this strand of research is a constructed distinction between social movements and civil societies in sub-Saharan Africa. Social movements are “more than civil society”, according to Brandes and Engels (2014). In contrast to social movement research, however, democracy and development research on Africa starts from the premise that political transitions in many of the region’s countries have led to the emergence of authentic social phenomena – including social movements – to which the term *civil society* can be applied (for the most recent examples, see articles in Obadare 2014 and Eberlei 2014). How have these diverging approaches within these two strands of discourse emerged?

For authors working in social movement and protest research, on the one hand, the debate is mainly about collective action, which, as they see it, aims to challenge and overcome existing power structures. Democracy and development research on Africa, on the other hand, focuses mainly on civil society action, whose purpose is to bring about change *within* the system. According to some representatives of social movement research, the main characteristic of social movements is that they use protest as their primary form of action. Civil society actors, by contrast, are usually integrated into formal democratic processes – whereby they contribute to stabilizing the system (Gould 2005, Larmer 2010, Brandes and Engels 2011, de Waal and Ibreck 2013). The real bone of contention, then, is not the form of action but the question whether the political activity takes place within the existing political system or endeavours to overcome it. Do these divergent perspectives accord with political realities in sub-Saharan Africa? In other words, do they reflect two actually existing parallel political phenomena? Or are these divergent standpoints influenced by the authors’ own theoretical preconceptions? In summary, are they constructed?

Some researchers see civil societies in Africa as products and instruments created and used by Western actors, primarily the protagonists of neoliberal globalization (e.g. Gould 2005, Brandes and Engels 2011, Williams and Young 2012). They contrast these actors with the supposedly authentic African social movements which, they claim, are deeply rooted in their respective societies. They thus make a distinction between these social movements and civil society. Other researchers, however, endeavour to reach a full and inclusive understanding of the civil society landscape in Africa, which naturally – how could it be otherwise in the 21st century? – also absorbs, and is partly shaped by, international influences. In an enlightening essay published back in 2002, Lewis discusses the various interpretations of the civil society phenomenon in the African context. He criticizes, on the one hand, the crude export of a Western understanding of civil society to Africa, but also regards the wholesale criticism of its civil society, which is often portrayed as the agent of an unholy alliance of ruling classes and donors, as inaccurate. Lewis points out that in actual fact, civil society formats have evolved over a long period in Africa and have successfully adapted the Western-generated model. Today, he says, they play an important role in political bargaining processes between citizens and state (Lewis 2002, p. 582).

Many research studies appear to be influenced not only by theoretical preconceptions but also, and to an even greater extent, by normative premises. This criticism is rightly levelled at those approaches which assume that African civil societies should, in practice, function in precisely the

same way as is the case in Western countries (for this strand of the debate, see Lewis 2002 and Larmer 2010). However, the premise, found in many theoretical contributions to social movement research, that social movements, fundamentally, have an emancipatory character and advocate for democratic forms of participation, merits equally critical reflection (see, for example, Brandes and Engels 2011, p. 9 f.). There is currently a lack of empirical evidence to support this view. Empirical studies in the field of social movement research – such as case studies on individual social movements – tend to suggest that there is a need for a more nuanced analysis of the phenomenon (e.g. Salem 2009, Olayode 2011). In the field of democracy and development research, the majority of approaches appear to focus on empirical phenomena in the civil society arenas of the respective countries and do not postulate a per se pro-democratic or a fundamentally negative role for civil society. The constructed distinction between civil society and social movements therefore does not appear especially fruitful, although a discussion of the empirical findings of both strands of research is desirable. This applies all the more if bridges are to be built across the supposed theoretical divides. This, then, is a plea for an inclusive interpretation and the use of the concept of civil society as an analytical category.

The term civil society has only featured in analyses of political phenomena in Africa since the late 1980s. However, it is important to distinguish between *the use of the term*, on the one hand, and *the actual existence of a socio-political sphere* that is now described as civil society, which was not previously described in these terms. The concept of civil society that originated in Europe (based, *inter alia*, on the works of Hegel, de Tocqueville and – later – Gramsci) gained contemporary political relevance in the context of democracy movements in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. During those years, the term became also influential in the Latin American context, and then emerged as an analytical category that was applied to political processes in Africa (e.g. Bayart 1986, Bratton 1989; see also Bratton 1994). Nonetheless, there is a long history of civil society activity in Africa, as African authors in particular have pointed out (Gyimah-Boadi 1996, Mamdani 1996, Cheru 2012; see also Ekeh 1975). Examples of such political struggles – including resistance to colonialism, independence movements, opposition to corrupt post-colonial regimes and human rights violations, campaigns for women’s rights, struggles against neoliberal structural adjustment programmes, and, from the late 1980s, advocacy for political liberalization and democracy – have also featured in recent research studies on African civil society (see, for example, Apusigah 2014, Teshome 2014, Meyns 2014).

Social movements constitute a specific section of the respective civil society landscape. More precisely, the literature on social movements in Africa defines two distinct but often intermeshing civil society formats. According to Rucht and Neidhardt (2001), a distinction can be made between *protests* and *social movements*. Protests are defined as a “collective, public action by non-state actors that expresses resistance or critique and that is connected to the formulation of a social or political demand” (ibid., p. 537, my translation). Protests do not initially require organized actors. Spontaneous protests or riots, such as those which occurred in reaction to massive food price rises in Burkina Faso (Engels 2011) or in Mozambique (Fiege 2014), fit into this paradigm and are a form of civil society action. During the course of the protests, social movements often emerge – defined as “mobilized networks of individuals, groups and organizations which, based on a shared collective identity, attempt to achieve or prevent social change, predominantly by means of collective protest” (ibid., p. 555, my translation).

In reality, protests organized by social movements are often combined with pragmatic systemic interventions, such as those typically ascribed by social movement researchers to civil society actors. Engels, for example, analyses the food riots in Burkina Faso and describes how representatives of the social movement behind the protests negotiated social and economic policy re-

forms with the government (2013, p. 13). Salem (2009) analyses the anti-slavery movement in Mauritania and describes the almost fluid transitions between resistance, protest, political awareness-raising and political negotiations, even parliamentary work. Aye (2013) studies the protests against petrol price rises in Nigeria and discusses why the trade unions, as the movement's most important organizational pillar, finally brought the strikes to a halt and negotiated a compromise with the government (for an analysis of the Nigerian trade unions and their role at the interface between protests and pragmatic politics, see also Obono 2011). Apusigah analyses women's anti-civil war protests in Sierra Leone and shows how they resulted in ongoing political work. Meyns (2014) and Hartmann (2014) describe the protests against the anti-constitutional attempts by the presidents in Zambia and Senegal to secure a third term in office, and make it clear how spontaneous protests, broad social movements and political negotiation processes supported by individual organizations or civil society networks complement each other. Social movements are not "more than civil society" (Brandes and Engels 2014), but a specific part of the civil society landscape in sub-Saharan Africa.

How can the concept of civil society that includes social movements be defined? Partly with direct reference to Gramsci and partly with reference to other theoretical works, such as Habermas's concept of the public sphere, a number of authors now postulate that civil society is more than the sum of collective non-state actors. For example, Orvis defines civil society as "a public sphere of formal or informal, collective activity autonomous from but recognizing the legitimate existence of the state" (2001, p. 20). And as Lewis points out "an increasingly universal negotiation between citizens, states and markets" can be observed in this sphere (2002, p. 582). This understanding of civil society includes social movements as long as they do not overtly challenge the existence of the state itself or seek to initiate violent regime change. The latter may be the intention of some religious, fundamentalist or ethno-nationalist groups or "movements", but it does not apply to the large majority of African social movements described in the literature, which as a rule advocate for change within constitutional parameters; indeed, in some cases, they act, in effect, as protectors of constitutional frameworks (as evidenced by the broad protest movements against unconstitutional third presidential terms).

The theoretical concept of a public sphere, in which, according to Habermas's definition, communicative power is created through the exchange and competition of arguments – in other words, the deliberative process reflects an ideal type in both Europe and Africa. Those theorists who, with reference to Gramsci, define the public sphere as a contested arena or "contested terrain" (Narsoo 1991) seem to be closer to reality. Foucault frames it in similar terms: "I prefer to see the public sphere as spaces of conflict and contestation" (quoted in Willems 2012, p. 24). It is self-evident that there is no equality between state and civil society actors in this terrain. Post-colonial governments in Africa – with strong support from international actors – have further expanded the colonial, hierarchical systems of rule. Critical opposition was more or less neutralized, often with either approval or even support from Western or Eastern governments. By means of repression, but also through almost unlimited access to economic resources, state hegemony in the political arena went largely unchallenged for decades (Gyimah-Boadi 1996, p. 125 f.). This situation did not change radically in the early 1990s. On the contrary, the perpetuation of specific political patterns in African politics has long been observed even after the democratic reforms (see, for example, van de Walle 2001, pp. 264-267). Although state power has been curtailed since the 1990s as a result of the liberalization of political systems, the struggles in the political arena are still characterized by extreme inequality.

Research on macro-political interventions by civil society actors in sub-Saharan Africa (with more than 20 case studies on interventions in six countries) shows that despite these power in-

equalities, civil society actors are taking effective political action (see articles in Eberlei 2014). The empirical studies provide evidence of diverse impacts in four major social spheres: combating war and violence; shaping visions for societal development; supporting democratic transition; and advocacy for development-oriented policies. In this context, as described above, civil society is understood as a public sphere, an arena in which social and political bargaining takes place. Civil society actors and their political activities were analysed in the context of their respective social debates, whether these related to constitutional reform negotiations, economic policy and social justice, women's rights, democratic processes, or simply the distribution of the state's resources. This dual approach allows identifying two dimensions of civil society. First, civil society can be defined as the collective, non-state, non-commercial actors who, in the interaction with state, commercial and other social forces, attempt to develop communicative power in order to influence social and political developments in line with their objectives. This includes social movements and protest movements. Second, through their political action, political communication and debates, these actors shape civil society in a more abstract sense. Civil society itself thus becomes a contested terrain in which state, commercial and international actors struggle for influence and hegemony.

Labelling the diverse and increasingly dynamic, indeed vibrant, civil societies in many African countries as puppets of international development agencies exaggerates the influence of the World Bank and other international actors, and, above all, underestimates and undervalues political self-organization by African societies.

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