Rural Radicalisms and the Politics of Order: Authority, Precarity, and Globality in Africa

Africa and Contemporary Global Protest

Nearly a decade after the Arab Spring uprisings, 2019 was referred to as the year of global street protests and mass demonstrations (Rachman 2019). Africa was no exception to the global pattern of protests, and in many respects they proliferated more quickly and more widely there than in other regions. During earlier waves of protests, demonstrations typically endured for days or weeks, but in recent cases—Malawi, Sudan, Togo, and Guinea for example—they continued for many months. Especially large mobilizations occurred during 2018–19 in Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Africa, Cameroon, and Nigeria, typically triggered by highly localized events, whether political exclusion, university fees, labor, price increases of key commodities such as food and fuel, or contested electoral campaigns.

In their geographical coverage, the protests around the globe were unrivalled in scope and variety, with comparisons often made to 1989, 1968, and even to the waves of insurgency in 1848. Typically seen as cases of "insurgent" or "street" citizenship (Holston 2009; Giugni and Grasso 2019), the protests were on a scale capable of radically disrupting daily life and inducing panic measures from governments as far afield as Hong Kong, India, Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Spain, France, the Czech Republic, Russia, Malta, Algeria, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and Sudan (Brannen et al. 2020). Popular mobilizations across such disparate locations, coupled with their variety of political repertoires, goals, and forms of organization, defy easy generalization. But their scope and impact is not in question. Street protests and strikes saw Evo Morales, the president of Bolivia, forced from office in November 2019 after thirteen years in power; Presidents Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria and Omar al-Bashir of Sudan both fell in April 2019 after decades in office. Underlying all of these movements lies the larger question of what full citizenship should entail, and the character, durability, and content of the prevailing social contract—what citizens expect from the state and the state's capacity and willingness to deliver on these expectations.

Despite common perceptions of Africa as wracked by violent conflict—conflicted and fragile states is the current World Bank term of art—since 2000 most protests have been generally unarmed and peaceful. Over the past decade,

mass uprisings in Africa have accounted for one in three of the non-violent campaigns aiming to topple dictatorships around the world, almost twice as many as Asia. Africa's non-violent uprisings have, moreover, had the highest success rate in the world: over half of the uprisings aimed at overthrowing dictatorships have succeeded.

But this picture is dominated by the figure of the deracinated, alienated, and disenfranchised urban youth. So where does rural protest fit into this frame? Is protest today largely limited to urban spaces and urban agendas, as the overview above suggests? Or are these realities the result of a methodological bias?

Six decades ago, in his 1967 book *Political Protest in the Congo*, Herbert Weiss first used the term "rural radicalism" to describe the rural dimensions of independence struggle in the Belgian Congo. Weiss overturned the conventional wisdom, as reflected in the arguments of Rupert Emerson and others during the "wave" of African independence, that "the rural masses supply neither leaders nor political impetus in African nationalist movements" (Bennett 1968). Although peasant revolts in Asia were studied as such, most studies of independence movements in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1950s and 1960s undervalued the role of the rural, as well as the fact that the rural masses did not consist only of peasants. Scholarship that was focused on independence struggles in both French and British West Africa typically described these as led by educated urban elites who had risen relatively high in the Western education systems established by European colonial systems. The pattern throughout Africa was that these elites would build their power bases first by leading a variety of social organizations within urban settings, such as ethnic associations, labor unions, youth associations, and alumni associations. Later, some of these associations would merge into larger groupings, until eventually, when political activity was permitted, these same elites transformed the associations into political parties. The move of these parties into rural areas varied in timing and emphasis. It was usually only when colony-wide elections were scheduled that it became critical to extend the party structures into the rural areas, and the most successful African parties succeeded in mobilizing the rural population. But Weiss's thesis was confirmed when in 1963, just two and a half years after Congo won its independence, the Congo Rebellions broke out. This massive, rural-based revolutionary movement—the largest in post-independence Africa at that time—was led by former Secretary-General of the Parti Solidaire Africain (PSA) Pierre Mulele, a Lumumbist and China-trained avowed Maoist.

Seemingly there was something Fanonite in the Congolese experience since rural populations, to a spectacular degree, wanted something quite radical: a drastic transformation of the colonial system and its institutions. Of course, in the decades that followed there was a raft of comparative historical work—triggered by Eric Wolf's early work on peasant revolutions (Wolf 1999; see also Scott 1977; Paige 1983)—that questioned the old Marxist adage of peasants as "potatoes in a sack" and their purported petit-bourgeois interests. Most of these cases did not easily conform to patterns of Left revolutionary class mobilization and already then suggested reformist agendas. Weiss himself

noted that even participants of the Kwilu rebellion hardly aimed for radical political change or for the creation of a new political order out of a lack of shared revolutionary consciousness, despite its Marxist sloganeering. The rebellion was, in effect, an outburst of rural radicalism missing a clear sense of revolutionary change and the organizational capacity and appeal to move beyond the ethnic frontiers (Welch 1975). No surprise perhaps that subsequently, in and outside of Africa, the focus was less on radicalism than on everyday resistance and patterns of subaltern avoidance, flight, dissimulation and low-key dissent.[1]

Rural Radicalism in Africa Today

Recently, in line with the global rise of protest, renewed attention has also been given to different forms of African rural protest—global dynamics of societal disruption, triggered by neoliberal politics and their failure to alleviate poverty; climate change and its pressure on natural resources and livelihoods; fear of loss of identity caused by globalization and growing concerns over the "mobile poor," including minorities and refugees (Scoones et al. 2018); and the uprooting impact of a global pandemic as a contributing factor—that provoke the emergence of radical forms of protest, ranging from contentious politics to populist voting behavior and armed mobilization.

What we can learn from these rural forms of contention is that a global process of social transformation today particularly affects rural societies. Of course, we should not essentialize these changes too much. Yet, what we are witnessing today suggests that we have reached a new momentum caused by profound socioeconomic shifts of rural space, shifts that are as central to the populist politics of the United States and France as they are to those of India and Brazil. In different parts of the world, farmers protest against extractivist states and economies, mobilize against neoliberal policies, take up arms against what is perceived as foreign occupation of local natural resources, or vote for rightist populist parties that seem to respond to farmers' concerns. Each of these manifestations of rural protest starts from an increased feeling of exclusion and dispossession and a rejection of what they see as a liberal, globalized, yet spatially urban concentrated world; they see themselves as deeply rooted in an idealized and even nostalgic notion of the rural; or echo aspirations to radically alter existing political setups. These radical rural politics are not by definition equal to revolutionary politics, nor are they limited to a quest to keep and restore rurally defined egalitarian yet highly exclusivist rural social orders. On a larger comparative canvas, rural radicalism becomes a rather ambiguous concept. It is rife with contradictions and paradoxical qualities, yet at the same time resists categorization by those standard labels that serve as markers of social and political strife and therefore moves beyond the mentioned left-right dichotomy to depict the rise of rural expressions of armed resistance. What links both leftist and conservative expressions of rural radicalism, indeed, is their anti-establishment and counterculture rhetoric of resistance.

Questioning the Notion of Rural Radicalism

The notion of "the rural" as a space of radicalism and of anti-colonial militancy is key to Weiss's account of the rise of political parties during the late 1950s independence struggle in the Belgian Congo. His focus on the Kwilu insurgency and the militant PSA persuasively argued that the peasant followers of the PSA, the rural masses, were more radically anti-colonial—in the sense of aggressively protesting for more substantive change—than their urban-educated, elite leadership. But a second rebellion in Kwilu was a more ambiguous project, involving different social groups with heterogeneous worldviews and beliefs. Although articulated in universal discourses of anti-imperialism and nationalism, in practice, local and particularistic conflicts and interests heavily shaped the rebellion. At the very least one needs to ask what was the subsequent history of this putative rural radicalism in all of its complexity, and second, where does "the rural"—understood in terms of broad patterns of protest, dissent, and struggle—stand in relation to the current patterns of African urban upheaval and mobilization?

In the study of Africa, the bifurcation between the rural and urban, and the forms of life, culture, and political ideology associated with each, has been a staple of many forms of political economy. Mahmood Mamdani's classic text *Citizen and Subject* (1996) and his account of the politics of decentralized despotism turn on this distinction. Urban bias, rural–urban terms of trade, and the very idea that the rural is the repository of customary law, (re)invented chiefly traditions, and the lifeworld of the African peasant, all have deep lineages in Africanist scholarship. The vast contemporary archive of development metrics and measures—the conventional development indices such as per capita income, human development indices, and forms of multidimensional or chronic poverty—typically uses the rural–urban framework for much of what passes as conventional poverty "policy talk." Certain strains of Marxist analysis and the variants of modernization theory often construe the rural and agrarian in strikingly similar ways: the world of tradition and culture, the semi-feudal, the world of antediluvian or merchant capital, the stronghold of "indigeneity." It all points to the larger question invoked in Paul Richards's (1996) invocation of the existence of rural and urban slums: namely, what exactly are the distinctive properties of the rural in any exploration of contemporary forms of rural radicalism?

For the purposes of this forum, we propose a quartet of rural transformations that are central to a rethinking of rural radicalism (for simplicity of exposition, we use 1960 as a rough and ready historical baseline from which to assess the changes in the African rural lifeworld since Weiss conducted his research). First is in relation to the circuits of capitalist accumulation. Karl Kautsky famously described the "agrarian question" as the ways in which capital was taking hold of and transforming production on- and off-farm (Banaji 1990). African peasants had of course been drawn into the global commodity markets since the seventeenth century, a process deepened and extended in the period after the "Scramble for Africa" in the late nineteenth century. But land frontiers are now all but gone; patterns of rural class formation and differentiation

collectively point to a set of new coordinates and relations associated with four decades of neoliberal development. There is no common pattern here across the continent, and uneven development is assuredly a touchstone for any analysis of rural forms of livelihood.

Second is the digital revolution. Digital technologies and the (relatively) cheap cell phone have irrevocably changed patterns of communication and interaction, access to data (and markets), financial transactions, and relations with state and other political institutions (see Gabor and Brooks 2017). None of this suggests any sort of level playing field for the rural domain, but these technologies have been consequential for forms of livelihood, for the informational environment, and for what one might call "rural consciousness." Patterns of rural electrification—solar panels and micro-grids—have contributed to the increased erosion of, and porosity across, sharp rural–urban boundaries.

Third is the political landscape itself. Not only has Africa not been immune to the global street protests and mass demonstrations summarized earlier, but patterns of postcolonial rule have also shifted and morphed. On the one hand, there was the political opening in Africa during the first half of the 1990s, in particular including the end of Apartheid in South Africa. And on the other, there were the descents into civil war and violent political conflicts in Somalia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Central Africa. The face of conflict became less the Cold War freedom fighters than the warlords or *génocidaires.* Politically, however, the picture is much more complex. On the question of elections and democracy, new analysis by Nic Cheeseman and others suggests that while there has not been systematic backsliding or recession, neither has there been a sort of democratic deepening. The picture is one of stability and durability. Many African states, says Cheeseman (2015), are in a state of "competitive authoritarianism" (see also Riedl 2014; Posner and Young 2007). From 2015 to 2019, the general pattern has been for the continent's more authoritarian states —such as Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, and Rwanda—to make little progress towards democracy and in some cases to become incrementally more repressive. At the same time, many of the continent's more democratic states— including Botswana, Ghana, Mauritius, Senegal, and South Africa—have remained "consolidating" or "defective" democracies, with very few dropping out of these categories to become "authoritarian" regimes. There may be an emergent "democratic divide" between those more open and partially democratic regimes which shift and morph under popular pressures and the authoritarian regimes which, in the face of opposition, turn the repressive screws (see Cheeseman 2015, 2020).[2] But this too is a dynamic and shifting field, as the recent raft of military coups in West Africa reveals.

But even more profoundly, the period after 1980 witnessed a number of rurally based conflicts and civil wars that brought insurgents, militants, and vigilante groups into the African countryside. The scale, intensity, and violence of these conflicts have left their mark, but point to questions of rural radicalism quite different from those of the late colonial period. One thinks, for example, of the contemporary political landscape of the Sahel, transformed since the onset of the War on Terror: the presence of foreign troops, home-grown Islamist groups transformed by global connections to Al-Shabab, AQIM, and ISIS, and new forms

of rural mobilization—such as the rise of ethno-religious militias, petro-insurgents from the Niger Delta oilfields, and the combustible politics of herder-farmer conflicts in the Middle Belt—collectively represent a very different picture of rural politics in the semi-arid lands of the West African Sahel (Hansen 2019; Thurston 2017). These "ungoverned" spaces, in the language of the US State Department, are shaped by the complexities of limited forms of statehood, similar in one register to the immediate postcolonial period but in another radically different, each producing new forms of control, authority, and rule.

Finally, there is what we might call—to extend Neil Brenner's concept of planetary urbanism (Brenner 2013, 2018)—the "planetary" rural. Giorgio Agamben (2009) refers to the massive multiplication of the "apparatuses" of neoliberal development since the late 1970s. This is reflected in the exports of a new raft of development policies and institutions. On the one hand, the rural sector has been the object of policies designed to build new "enterprise-oriented" and "market-ready" rural subjects and new institutions (decentralized, empowered, participatory, transparent etc.). On the other, these subjects have been drawn—as a consequence of their poverty and precarity—into international migrant circuits, especially over the last decade, far exceeding anything in the late colonial era. Whether licit or illicit, these forms of movement often resulted in a radical depopulation of young men (Ribot and Turner 2020). Added to this mix is the securitization of parts of the continent—the Horn, the Sahel, Central Africa—which saw the presence of UN Blue Helmets and other security forces in the African countryside on an unprecedented scale. This conflation of global geopolitical and geo-economic forces and processes in the wake of the end of the Cold War have left their mark on Africa's rural world. The footprint of such planetary transformations is not unique, of course, to *rural* Africa, but there is little doubt that they collectively represent a different lifeworld, a different set of experiences—dare one say a different consciousness—and a different raft of livelihoods for sub-Saharan Africa's 650-million-strong rural, and largely young, population. The ideological and political ether in these spaces strike us as being of a very different order than the 1950s Pende lifeworld described so vividly by Herbert Weiss and demand new sorts of concepts and analytics to grasp the conditions of possibility for rural radicalism and rural politics more generally.

Forum Issue

This collection of four articles is an attempt to do just that. Each traces new forms and practices of rural radicalism in light of these transformations. Examining a range of case studies across the continent, contributors break apart what is *radical* about each—what defines an instance of contestation as truly radical instead of simply idealistic, and how groups come to pursue radical ends—as well as the nature of the *rural*, where these dynamics are changing in light of capitalist accumulation, digital revolutions, shifting political landscapes, and the rise of

the "planetary" rural. The articles approach these questions through research grounded in rich empirical data in order to investigate lived experience along with theoretical frameworks for understanding contemporary rural radicalism. Collectively, these articles dialogue with Weiss's original framework, revealing diverse expressions of radicalism and new modes for understanding the radicalism, and the nature of the rural, in protest and contestation in the contemporary Central African countryside.

Several of the papers focus on peaceful resistance as part of the transformation of the landscape of political protest. Mampilly's overview of social movements in Africa argues that, although organized violence dominates most discussions of radical political change on the continent, unarmed social movements are also significant actors, and not just in urban areas. Through examples such as Tanzania, South Sudan, and DRC, he argues for the importance of three factors in changing the nature of rural protest: first, the transformation of the rural political economy by Asian investment and Africa's changing position within global capitalism; second, circular patterns of urban–rural migration, which are altering and interconnecting both spaces; and third, changes in the rural political sphere, including the diminution of traditional authorities' power, and the decreasing appeal of violent mobilization. This analysis draws out the changing nature of the rural in Africa today, and complicates the picture of armed mobilization in rural areas by assessing factors that lead to a preference for unarmed movements.

Another paper dives deeply into a specific instance of peaceful protest: Sara Weschler and Tessa Laing recount the history of an unarmed occupation of the grounds of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights by activists from a remote rural area of Uganda, Apaa. They examine the particular challenges that remote rural communities face in bringing resistance to the powerful, and lay out the radical tactics of the occupiers, breaking apart the pairing of radicalism with violence. Their contribution highlights the tactical decisions that lead to the choice of unarmed mobilization, and the interplay of protestors' strategic choices and challenges with the extreme remoteness of their home lands.

A contribution by Louisa Lombard and Gino Vlavonou seeks to reinsert ideology and politics into discussions of armed mobilization, focusing on the Anti-Balaka movement in the Central African Republic. Their paper compares the discourses about the Anti-Balaka's political vision espoused by urban, elite members and rural, peasant members. It finds that while Anti-Balaka are largely united around a flexible and polyvalent value of autochthony, elite Anti-Balaka rebel-protesters speak a self-consciously political and geopolitical language, but peasants seek to establish a moral economy of interpersonal respect—a project that is radical in that it is something peasant Anti-Balaka can enact on their own. The article thus highlights political ideology within discussions of armed mobilization, exploring the attraction of "autochthony" discourses and their multiple meanings across diverse contexts.

These contributions address the changing forms of the urban–rural relationship, characterized by shifting connections, urbanization, and forms of

capitalist accumulation and extraction, along with the circular patterns of migration that have transformed both cities and countryside, as Mampilly's paper notes. Laing and Weschler's analysis of the Apaa protest deepens our understanding of how the geographic context of the rural shapes tactical choices, and how rural residents may create connections with more urban spaces. Turning attention to South Sudan, Naomi Pendle and Deng Maror focus on the lived experiences of rural youth who, as members of pro-government forces, commit violence in the capitals of Sudan and South Sudan. That these rural youth participated in protecting the governments of the day may be surprising, given urban–rural conflicts that would seem to give rural residents reason to become anti-government radicals. But, based on research into rural pro-government youth's actions and rhetoric, this article explores the radical reimagining of the relationship between the rural and urban, and the reshaping of public authority and property rights in the Sudans that have motivated this takeover of urban spaces and power by rural actors. Prompted by how armed youth seek to remake the safety and moral segregation of urban spaces, the article helps us to rethink how the relationship between urban and rural shapes violent expression.

The quartet of articles in this forum seeks to revise and expand our understanding of rural radicalism in Africa and beyond. The articles' analyses are based on rigorous empirical research on the continent—a methodological basis that, one hopes, will only expand in the coming years. We should not limit the attention to specific cases, however. The different contributions show us that we are observing manifestations of rural radicalism that are informed by both local issues of contention and global processes of exclusion. Such rural radicalism is not limited to Africa. Global dynamics of neoliberalism and environmental change radically transform rural environments in many parts of the world. The rural–urban divide has long been understood as central to the so-called social base of former US President Trump and the Make America Great Again movement or farmer movements in Europe. The rural alienation that these changes produce inspires different forms of (in some cases armed) resistance and the support of populist political projects. To fully capture these manifestations a comparative investigation is required. The notion of rural radicalism provides us with a useful tool to do so, as it shows that radical rural politics are ambiguous by definition: they are not equal to revolutionary politics, nor are they limited to a quest to keep and restore rurally defined, egalitarian yet highly exclusivist rural social orders.

It goes without saying that the African continent is a complex social and political space, and we can fully anticipate that the sorts of global shocks and insecurities of the last five years—pandemics, price shocks, war, financial instability—will add unpredictable and unanticipated sources of fuel to rural politics and rural radicalism. It may require, too, new concepts and approaches to our understanding of the shifting contours of "the rural." Yet there is also a need for careful and rigorous comparative analysis, not just with and across the continent but also in relation to broad swaths of the Global South and North alike, where rural radicalism is alive and well.

Notes

1. The canonical work is Scott (1985).
2. See also Cheeseman's 2021 University of Leuven PowerPoint presentation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBT8hXuv4so.

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