

African Revolutions

By David Smiley



This article is one of a series examining revolutions around the world. So far, with the exception of the Asian Tiger land reforms (see *Do Revolutions Work? Progress*, July-August 2011), I have found no revolutions that reduced poverty and inequality, and that were also nonviolent. So, what is Africa's revolutionary record? The African Union has reported (*Guardian Weekly*, 2007) that in the last 50 years there had been 186 coups and 26 major wars in Africa. There were now more than 16 million refugees in a population that had doubled since 1975. And since 2007 a dozen revolutions, mostly ongoing, have erupted across North Africa and the Middle East with outcomes that remain very uncertain.

The first humans left Africa and spread all across the world. William McNeill (2003) describes this exodus as the outcome of territorial rivalry between tribes of hunter-gatherers, the first of humanity's land wars. Meanwhile, those that stayed behind were displacing the remnants of Neanderthal Man in another land grab powerfully fictionalised in William Golding's *The Inheritors* (1955). But from then on it was the outside world that visited destruction on Africa's people.

The first intruders

With no written languages little was known of African history. Greeks, Roman and Moslems colonised the Mediterranean and East coasts long before Europeans stopped for water and fruit on their way down the West coast, round the Cape to explore Asia. In the middle there were both nomadic and settled tribes about which little is known until trade for slaves, gold, and ivory gave rise to kings and empires.

Slavery

Arab intruders had captured and exported African slaves to the Middle East and beyond for a thousand years before the Atlantic slave trade began. Caravans from Darfur would bring 20,000 slaves to Cairo in one trip. Even by 1830 the Sultan of Zanzibar received head taxes on 37,000 slaves a year passing through.

Then, over less than 300 years, an incredible 11-14 million slaves were shipped out to the west, 40% to Brazil, 40% to the Caribbean, 15% to the rest of Latin America, and 5% to the US. Merchants, raiders and princes received huge incentives to capture and handle this human cargo. A few

escaped slavery by converting to Islam. The trade promoted warlords and therefore guns, about 20 million guns being imported into Africa during that period.

The scramble for Africa. Europeans had only skirted the coasts until Stanley met up with Livingstone in the middle of "Darkest Africa". But within 15 years Britain, France Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Germany and Italy had gobbled up all of Africa except Ethiopia. The colonising procedure was essentially the same in every case. Africans were progressively pushed out of their traditional lands into poorer and poorer land until they had no choice but to abandon traditional life styles and work for low wages or, in some situations, none at all. In the last 20 years of the nineteenth century Europeans conquered the best 85 percent of African land in a grandiose act of theft. Europeans used the land for their own cattle, crops, and timber, and then they were surprised to find what actually lay beneath the land. Roughly speaking, in Sub-Saharan Africa it was gold, diamonds and copper, while north of the Sahara it was oil. Asante (2007) describes the appalling destruction of African society in a brutality that Joseph Konrad had captured in Heart of Darkness. Here are some of the legacies:

Congo

Privately owned by the King of Belgium, tens of thousands of Africans were once shipped across the country for forced labour in the copper mines. Stanley, on behalf of King Leopold of the Belgians, had held a meeting and signed a deal with 500 of Congo's tribal chieftains. As a result King Leopold became the absolute ruler over a colony 80 times the size of Belgium. Discipline was enforced by taxes and, when these didn't work, by jail, whips, the cutting off hands or shooting. Men were shipped hundreds of miles to the copper mines. Many women and children who tried to follow died, others survived by prostitution, a legacy continuing to this day. Recent conflicts in the Congo, a country rich in minerals yet one of the poorest in the world, have cost over five million deaths.

Nigeria

After they captured Lagos in 1861 the British handed out presents to local chiefs in exchange for treaty membership of a British "protectorate". Armed with machine guns and cannon, "British troops and Africans (hired to conquer other Africans) battled inland" eventually owning what would become Nigeria, extracting tin and palm oil until 1960 brought independence. Self-government simply transferred rent seeking from Britain to a series of corrupt generals in a civil war that cost a million lives. And then the discovery of oil raised the rent seeking even higher, "the rich and mighty stole colossal sums of public money...\$12 billion were unaccounted for...the number of public servants tripled" while the poor got poorer and "farmers flocked to cities, seeking work and finding only poverty and squalor." Then, when oil prices dropped, average annual income dropped from \$670 to \$300. (Davis, C., 2004)

South Africa developed as a frontier invasion, the first British wave radiating from the Cape of Good Hope and the second, the Afrikaners' Great Trek, far up north until it met Zulu tribes coming south, both land hungry. The next complication was the Boers' discovery of enormous diamond and gold reefs. Cecil Rhodes, representing the British government and his own mining company (de Beers), encircled the Boers and precipitated the Boer Wars (see the movie Breaker Mourant). The next complication arose from the need for labour for white agriculture and industry and this was met by a form of segregation called Apartheid.

In Africa today by far the biggest exports are minerals and oil. But while mining and drilling produce most of Africa's revenues, they employ only two million people. The resulting unemployment encourages the multiplication of

war lords and the boy soldiers who follow them to glory. For these youths, there is no comparison between the dull poverty of village or shanty life and the macho excitement of waving AK-47s from the backs of trucks, hacking their rivals and raping their women. And these new life styles are profitably supported by the extraction of protection money (rent?) in lieu of rupturing oil and mineral supply lines. Those who escape massacre in the bush go to overcrowded cities where they end up in slums. "By 2015 Black Africa will have 332 million slum-dwellers, a number expected to double every 15 years" (Davis M, 2006). As a slum percentage of urban population Ethiopia and Chad lead the world at 99.4, with Nigeria at 79.2. For Sub-Saharan Africa the average is 71 percent.

What is being done about Africa's inequality, unemployment, poverty and slums that appear connected with Africa's endless upheavals, revolutions and wars? Unfortunately, most authorities in politics and human rights peddle well-meaning generalities with little practical advice. For example, one of the few Africans who has written a highly-regarded political history of Africa (Asante, 2007) devotes a quarter of his book to various independence movements, five Pan-African conferences, and a new partnership for Africa's development (NEPAD). All of these have generated lists of vague principles and ideals that have, generally speaking, failed to deliver. Ironically, Asante quotes a typical list of these ideals "we should go back to our roots... liberate the people" and that "power should be handed to the people". The conference speaker of those stirring words was none other than Colonel Gaddafi. The Gaddafi family fortune was recently estimated at \$200 billion, about four times that of the Mubarak family. These massive fortunes and those of all the Royal and not so royal families that run Africa and the Middle East, derive from cornering real estate, business monopolies and natural resources, all highly taxable.

So, what should be done? Until recently the redistribution of land to peasant families in South Korea, Taiwan and China (after Mao died in 1976) led to egalitarian societies with the highest rates of economic growth ever recorded anywhere. But that was when these economies were largely rural. Today, more people are urban than rural. In Libya, for example, 84 percent of the population is urban and its main export is oil. What, then, should be done in Libya, and elsewhere in Africa? Two reforms will help remove poverty, inequality and unemployment. The first reform is the collection of land rent for public rather than private purposes. Advocates are many, including a German called Friedrich Engels, who helped Marx write the Communist Manifesto, and an American called Henry George who wrote a best seller called *Progress and Poverty*. A practical example, satisfying the taxation criteria of efficiency, equity, unavailability and simplicity, though currently set at very timid rates, can be found in Australian local government rates on unimproved land values. The second reform is the collection of natural resources rent, also for public rather than private purposes. Advocates include most economists. Examples include mining super-profit taxes and carbon taxes.

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