CRISES OF MARXISM IN AFRICA AND POSSIBILITIES FOR THE FUTURE
Africa joined three other continents in the twentieth century’s experiment in Marxist–Leninist governance. The first African regimes to claim Marxism as one source of inspiration were established in the late 1950s with the commencement of the European decolonisation of Africa, some forty years after Russia’s October Revolution. The first orthodox Marxist–Leninist regimes appeared in the early 1960s, with the orthodox tide cresting in the mid- to late 1970s. The Marxist–Leninist regimes dissolved at the beginning of the 1990s, their dissolution by then just one moment in the global ‘collapse of communism’. These regimes are of enduring historical interest, but their experience also yields lessons for those seeking a progressive or egalitarian way forward for twenty-first-century Africa.

The experience of Marxist–Leninist governance was disastrous by virtually any defensible metric. The lessons it offers for contemporary social democrats and democratic socialists are thus largely negative. New generations of activists and intellectuals in South Africa and elsewhere often seem too ready to forget or deny these in their rush to embrace slogans, concepts and iconography reminiscent of authoritarian rather than democratic socialism.

Bearing in mind both the historical interest value of Africa’s Marxist regimes and the need, more than two decades after their demise, to learn what we can from their failures, I offer below seven theses about Africa’s Marxist–Leninist governments and the movements undergirding them.
The theses refer to the doctrines and practices of parties, movements and political currents that claimed to be Marxist and were guided to a significant degree by particular interpretations of Marxist theory. The chapter does not address academic Marxism, and it sidesteps the question of whether these regimes were ‘truly’ Marxist, whether they correctly interpreted the canon or indeed whether it constitutes a category error to refer to a regime as Marxist (as opposed to, say, popular-democratic or socialist). I do, however, conclude with some critical comments on Marxist theory as such and take the view that Marxist theory is probably implicated, along with other factors, in the failure of the ‘Marxist regimes’.

**THESIS ONE**

There was no clear qualitative difference between the levels of radicalism displayed by the Marxist–Leninist regimes and the preceding African socialist ones.

Defenders of the African Marxist regimes generally viewed them as marking a clear break from the immediately preceding (and partly overlapping) phenomenon of ‘African socialism’, the movement that dominated the first phase of post-independence African governance. There certainly were differences between the two ‘moments’. The ‘African Marxist’ regimes hewed more closely to Marxist–Leninist orthodoxy, both doctrinally and in their approach to party organisation. In contrast to the African socialist emphasis on mass parties and African communal solidarity, they established vanguard parties of the working class and girded for class struggle. Eschewing African socialism’s celebration of a communalistic African personality and its goal of recovering the ethos of pre-colonial agrarian socialism, the African Marxists were for the most part relentlessly modernising and universalistic. They also established a tighter relationship with the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc than did the more non-aligned African socialists. The new cohort of African Marxists positioned themselves relative to the African socialists much as Marx and Engels had done vis-à-vis the utopian socialists, contrasting the scientific character of their approach with the eclecticism, romanticism and naiveté of the African socialists.
One would be hard-pressed, though, to identify clear qualitative differences between the levels of social radicalism exhibited by the two types of regime. The more committed African socialist governments initiated programmes of nationalisation, rural cooperative-building and popular mobilisation that look pretty radical by today’s lights. They were moreover not rustics: in key cases, like Kwame Nkrumah’s Ghana and Ahmed Ben Bella’s Algeria, they vigorously promoted programmes of industrialisation. They did not believe that a dormant African egalitarianism stood ready to reassert itself the moment colonialism was thrown off; like the orthodox Marxists, they envisaged an active cultural effort to create a socialist ‘new man.’ The assumption that they were consistently voluntaristic (or naively humanistic) is also false: the African socialist regimes were, like their Marxist successors, prone to authoritarianism and resorted to coercion of the peasantry. Confronted by peasants who appeared far less keen on socialism than the theory of African communalism had supposed them to be, Guinea’s Sékou Touré and Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere coerced them into villages (Ottoway and Ottoway 1986: 45–59). And while the African socialists maintained some distance from the Soviet bloc, the more radical amongst them were keen anti-imperialists and eager to secure their countries’ independence from the capitalist world economy.

**THESIS TWO**

There was little difference between the levels of Marxist commitment, social radicalism or democratic zeal displayed by the coup-engendered military Marxist regimes and those that came to power via protracted guerrilla war.

The prominence of the military in African Marxism elicited controversy amongst both African civilian leftists and academic commentators. Marxist–Leninism came to power by military *coup d’état* in Congo-Brazzaville (1963), Mali (1968), Somalia (1969), Dahomey (1972), which was later renamed Benin, Ethiopia (1974), Madagascar (1975) and Upper Volta (1983), later renamed Burkina Faso. Marxist military takeover was not envisaged in the Marxist classics; nor did it acquire, like guerrilla war, a subsequent iconic status in Marxist revolutionary theory. It involved armed forces delivering revolution from on
high rather than the people securing it from below. Leftist critics saw soldiers as more likely to install regimentation than participatory democracy. The military’s uneven acquaintance with Marxism, its weak popular roots and preoccupation with power certainly made soldiers improbable bearers of socialist deliverance (Giorgis 1990: 54; Halliday and Molyneux 1981: 35–38). Perhaps not surprisingly, quite a few academic observers concluded that these regimes were not really Marxist. They were thus denied recognition of their leftist authenticity in the same way that earlier African socialists had been.

These critics underestimated the Marxist–Leninist commitments of military leaders, just as many had earlier underestimated the seriousness of the radical African socialists. There are no grounds for thinking that the military regimes were more authoritarian, or less authentically Marxist, than those established by guerilla war. These regimes were authoritarian, acted pragmatically rather than ideologically in certain instances, were vulnerable to coups and warlordism and spent a lot on the military. But the same could be said of, for example, Angola’s ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) in the 1980s. Military-ruled Somalia set aside ideological affinity to invade Marxist Ethiopia – but the non-African cases of China and Vietnam remind us that Marxist–Leninist regimes brought to power by mass-based guerrilla war also invaded Marxist-ruled neighbours (Vietnam and Cambodia respectively).

The fact is that officers, especially in junior ranks, were often highly radicalised. Some, like Captain Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso, were politicised in advance of the revolutionary process while others, like Benin’s Lieutenant-Colonel Mathieu Kérékou, swung left in the course of it. In Congo, Ethiopia and Madagascar, arguably also in Benin, the military came to power as part of popular movements. Once in power they cooperated or competed with civilian leftists on matters ideological, generally with radicalising effect (Ayele 1990: 16–17; Covell 1987: 6; Keller 1988: 192, 196). Military leaders issued symbolically important Marxist–Leninist pronouncements, notably the Derg’s Programme for the National Democratic Revolution, Madagascar’s Revolutionary Charter, Sankara’s ‘Political orientation speech’ and General Mohamed Siad Barre’s ‘Blue-and-white-book’. Aware that rule by soldiers violated Marxist canons, military governments also constructed ostensibly civilian Marxist–Leninist parties. While in Congo and Somalia the transition from military to civilian-party rule was a façade, in Benin and Madagascar it marked a genuine if incomplete process of civilianisation. Finally – the proof of the socialist pudding, some might say – military governments instituted
central planning, widespread nationalisation and serious efforts to improve health, education and literacy. Where the military-civilian government in Madagascar deviated from the Leninist script it was in order to preside over the most pluralistic Marxist regime in Africa.

The other route to power for African Marxists was guerrilla warfare. Armed struggle broke out in countries where intransigent regimes – colonial and African, white and black – refused to relinquish colonies (Portugal, independent Morocco), abandon white minority rule (Rhodesia, South Africa), grant regional autonomy (Ethiopia, post-independence Sudan) or stem human rights violations and ethnic favouritism (independent Uganda). Anti-colonial guerrilla war brought to power the MPLA in Angola (1975), the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) (1975), the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo) (1975), the Zimbabwe African National Union (Zanu) (1980) and the South West African People's Organisation (Swapo) in Namibia (1990). Guerrilla war played some part in the victory of the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa (1994). The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) won independence for Eritrea (1991) following a guerrilla war against Marxist–Leninist Ethiopia. Guerrilla war also enabled the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) to gain power in Ethiopia at the head of a multinational Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) to win power in Uganda in 1986 and forces originating in the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) to achieve independence for South Sudan in 2011. Of these various formations, only MPLA and Frelimo set up Marxist–Leninist regimes or made a serious effort to implement socialism. Several others were Marxist or Marxist-oriented at some point before achieving power (PAIGC, Zanu, Swapo, EPLF, TPLF, NRM, SPLM and the ANC) but never tried or else failed to establish recognisably socialist states or economic systems. Zanu's post-2000 re-radicalisation is, at best, an arguable exception to this rule (I will return to this later). An originally Marxist-orientated guerrilla movement, the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (Polisario), is still contending for power (though currently only diplomatically) in Western Sahara. It does not intend to establish a socialist regime.

With arguable exceptions such as the ANC in the early 1960s, Africa's leftist guerrilla movements sought power by waging a variant of the people’s war strategy developed by Mao Zedong, General Vo Nguyên Giáp and others in Asia, rather than the more elitist and militaristic foco warfare associated with
guerrilla movements in Cuba and South America (Munslow 1986: 8–9; Young 1997: 33). People’s war entailed extensive political preparation of the peasantry, who supplied the physical force behind armed struggle, the privileging of political leadership over military command and the establishment of ‘liberated zones’ in which movements could establish rear bases and build embryonic socialist orders. Frelimo and PAIGC were the most successful in securing liberated zones; other groups achieved more brittle or fleeting successes.10 The PAIGC’s Amilcar Cabral, exponent of petit bourgeois ‘class suicide’ and ‘returning to the source’ to live amongst the peasantry, became Africa’s most famed contributor to the theory of this kind of warfare.11

For their admirers in the 1970s and early 1980s, the movements that had engaged in people’s war were definitely to be taken more seriously as Marxists than either the reformist first wave of African socialists or the later Marxist military regimes (Ethiopia perhaps excepted).12 According to some commentators, Frelimo, MPLA and PAIGC in particular, were products of a ‘logic of protracted struggle’ that inculcated democratic habits and socially transformative zeal. Because these movements depended on peasant support, they understood the value of popular participation and because their leaders had to fight so long and hard, honing their politics along the way in rivalry with reformist or reactionary elements, they were likely to be theoretically more astute and committed. In contrast to the African socialists, they were genuinely radical; in contrast to the military Marxists, they were, at least potentially, authentically democratic. Having already roused the population from passivity, their reconstruction efforts were moreover likely to benefit, post-revolution, from a release of popular energy.13

Viewed retrospectively, these positive claims made for ‘protracted struggle’ and ‘people’s war’ seem unconvincing. It is far from clear, for example, that the guerrilla movements were less militaristic than the Marxist military regimes. It may be no coincidence that Africa’s most successful anti-colonial guerrilla army, the PAIGC’s Revolutionary Armed Forces of the People (FARP), provided a base for opposition to the first post-colonial government, that of Cabral’s brother Luís, which it overthrew in 1980 (Dhada 1993: 138); or that the leader then installed, Joao Vieira, was himself deposed in the course of a bloody civil war in 1999. The MPLA, for its part, assigned substantial areas of Angola to military control in the 1980s, spent an estimated seventy per cent of government revenue on its armed forces and was besieged by recurrent warlordism both in opposition and power (Ciment 1997: 130, 160; Somerville 1986: 65).
It is also striking how little the experience of liberated zones did to entrench post-independence democratic practice or to cement a lastingly sympathetic relationship between Marxist governments and the peasants they had earlier depended upon. Frelimo, for example, discarded the participatory priorities and pro-peasant orientation of its guerrilla-war days to set up, post-1975, a centralised pro-industrial regime willing to employ coercion against its rural subjects. It is anyway doubtful whether the liberated zones were ideal incubators of future democratic practice. The exigencies of warfare were as likely to inculcate habits of military command as they were to cultivate democratic instincts. And finally, there is no evidence that Marxists honed by protracted struggle stuck to socialism any more tenaciously than military-Marxist or even African-socialist regimes when confronted by economic crises in the 1980s and the hard bargaining of international lending agencies.

**THESIS THREE**

While orthodox Marxism–Leninism was not imposed on Africa by external powers, its local champions were cultural outliers.

How did a European-hewed doctrine like Marxism make its way to Africa? It is certainly true that, as many alleged during the cold war, the international communist bloc provided important impetus. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR or Soviet Union), the German Democratic Republic and Cuba were the key international Marxism-exporters. China – and Maoism – were early contenders, but fell by the wayside.\(^{14}\) The Soviet bloc’s capacity to provide military aid gave it significant leverage, especially with those (like the MPLA and Ethiopia’s ruling Provisional Military Administrative Council, or Derg) who were fighting desperate wars for survival. There is also no doubt that the Soviets reinforced Leninist orthodoxy – for example, by encouraging the Ethiopian and Somali military governments to set up vanguard parties, offering political and technical education courses in the Soviet Union and supplying teachers versed in dialectical materialism to universities and ideological schools in Africa.\(^ {15}\) When the Soviet Union embarked on a path of pro-market reform and disentanglement from cold war proxy conflicts in the mid-1980s, Africa’s Marxist regimes had little choice but to join its ideological retreat.
Yet it would be wrong to suppose that Africa's Marxist movements adopted Marxist policies in order to secure Soviet arms or Cuban troops. Their Marxism usually preceded the relationship with the Soviet bloc or developed independently of it. Tension occasionally broke out between Marxist governments and the Soviets, for example when the MPLA leadership suspected Moscow's hand in a 1977 coup attempt (Ciment 1997: 163–164; Keller 1988: 237, 268–270; Ottoway and Ottoway 1986: 5–10, 34). Marxist governments in Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau and Benin kept lines of communication open with the West in order to offset dependence on the Soviets, while others, like Angola, invited Western capitalists to help them develop extractive industries – much as African-socialist Guinea had done.16 Nor, contra John Saul and others (Ottoway and Ottoway 1986: 80–81; Saul 1985: 28, 138, 145–146; Saul 1993b: 73), can the authoritarian tendencies of African Marxist regimes be ascribed in any substantial measure to Soviet-bloc influence: they were largely the home-grown product of African Leninism.

Nor did Marxist–Leninist regimes exhaust the list of external communist and leftist ‘suppliers’ of Marxism. Ironically, colonial networks themselves performed a vital part in Marxism’s transmission to Africa. Activists in the colonies acquired a fair proportion of their Marxism through contact with communist and labour movements based in colonial metropoles. The contact occurred when African students studied in European capitals, notably in Lisbon in the case of the PAIGC and the MPLA and it occurred when European socialist and communist parties and trade union federations – especially French federations – established branches in the colonies. Touré, for example, started out as an organiser in the communist-dominated Confédération Générale du Travail. Much earlier, the British labour movement had closely influenced the beginnings of South African Marxism. Portugal implanted settlers whose numbers included a leftist anti-Salazarist fringe.

A second route that Marxism took to Africa passed via class, racial, ethnic and cultural outsiders living in African urban centres such as Brazzaville, Luanda, Bissau and the Rand in South Africa. These included educated sectors, notably students, teachers and sometimes civil servants; relatively privileged African assimilados in Lusophone Africa; mixed-race mestiços in Angola and Mozambique and Western Cape ‘coloured’ people in South Africa; and immigrants who were in important senses culturally distant from both black indigenes and established white settler populations, notably Indians in South Africa and the Portuguese colonies (many of the latter Goans) and Jews who emigrated
to South Africa from the Russian Empire. Universities also provided bases for an academic Marxism. These included notably the University of Dar es Salaam and various universities in South Africa, though academic Marxism was plugged into a network that extended to North America, Britain, France and the Netherlands (Bozzoli and Delius 1990; Turok 1986: 59–60). These various groups were educated enough to generate avid readers of Marxist texts and enjoyed cultural connections with a wider world. For assimilados, Marxism offered a formula for anti-colonial struggle that kept faith with Western modernity. White, Indian and mestiço leftists found in Marxism’s prioritisation of class over race an analytic approach that did not associate them indelibly with the system of racial oppression (in the case of the white leftists) or exclude them from exercising an active and equal – critics would claim a more than equal – influence in struggles against colonialism and apartheid. Many South African Jewish immigrants, for their part, had previously belonged to the Russian labour movement, whose ideals they brought to the new country.

Outsider groups like these, together with mostly small cores of organised workers (Allen 1989: 62, 68–69; Radu and Somerville 1989: 160), formed Marxist milieus in the capital cities of independent African states. These were to be found not only in African countries that ‘went Marxist’, but in many that did not (Turok 1986). The component groups of the radical milieus interacted dynamically with Marxists in power, cooperating with them in some cases, in others competing, sometimes violently (Allen 1989: 31–32, 68–69; Keller 1988: 177, 199–200, 218–219). The milieus also threw up a variety of ‘left oppositions’.

The anchorage of Marxist regimes in the radical, racially mixed milieus of capital cities goes some way to account for the distrust felt towards them among two groups: rural Africans and inhabitants of regions beyond capital-city hinterlands. Thus in Angola, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (Unita) appealed with some success to the resentments of African peasants, especially those located outside the MPLA’s Kimbundu heartland. In Mozambique the Marxist southerners who dominated Frelimo contended with the suspicions of both northern Makonde traditionalists and Africanist leaders from the central regions. The submersion of Marxist regimes in metropolitan milieus helps, further, to explain their modernist zeal. Marxist rulers were hostile to traditional authorities, religions and practices while favouring rapid industrialisation, high technology and large-scale mechanised farming.
Despite the orthodox Marxist–Leninists’ insistence upon their unoriginality, Africa’s Marxism exhibited some distinctive features.

Was there a distinctive African contribution to Marxist theory and practice? Curiously, many of Africa’s Marxist leaders answered this question emphatically in the negative. Arriving in the wake of the initial wave of African socialism, the new cohort of Marxist–Leninist leaders coming to power mainly in the 1970s insisted on their orthodoxy. If African socialists had sought a path to socialism that appealed to African particularity, the later cohort insisted that there could be no specifically African socialism or Marxism, that there was just one universal Leninist Marxism, albeit one that needed to be fitted to local conditions in Africa as everywhere else it was employed.

Yet the story of Marxism in Africa was not entirely bereft of original contributions.

First, African socialism’s narrative cannot be cleanly separated from Marxism’s. At least two of the most prominent African-socialist leaders, Touré and Nkrumah, viewed Marxism as a part of their theoretical lineage and Nkrumah became explicitly Marxist after being thrown out of power. We can therefore choose to view African socialism as itself contributing – and as imparting originality – to African Marxism.

And doctrinally at least, African socialism was interesting and creative in both programme and organisational style. Its ideologues held that that the spirit of an essentially communalistic pre-colonial African society could be invoked by those building post-colonial societies. Africa’s early communal experience (the theory went) qualified new African states to advance to socialism without passing through the period of capitalist development and class conflict that, according to Marxist orthodoxy, was supposed to precede it.

In addition, African socialists appealed to an essential African-ness (what Léopold Sédar Senghor called ‘Negritude’) in their efforts to mobilise popular energy behind economic development. Negritude was one instance of an African-socialist appeal to humanistic themes, one that emphasised voluntarism and solidarity, sought alternatives to Western instrumental rationality and engaged intimately with the aesthetic, psychological and cultural as opposed (or in addition) to the material, economic and scientific tasks of the African liberation struggle.
Because they believed that Africa could attain socialism without class struggle, radical African socialists moreover organised mass parties rather than Leninist revolutionary vanguards. Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party at one stage claimed a membership of 2 million in a total population of 4.7 million (Nkrumah 1964a: 105; Ottoway and Ottoway 1986: 15, 20). Guinea’s Touré ‘experienced with an enormous variety of institutions in his painful search for an overall system which would embody his vision of socialism’ (Ottoway and Ottoway 1986: 55). His ruling Parti Démocratique du Guinée started life as a mass organisation, morphed into a vanguard party, re-emerged as a party for all the people and finally reinvented itself as a ‘party-state’. In this last permutation it sought literally to dissolve the state by absorbing society into the party (Ottoway and Ottoway 1986: 52–59).

Second, and professions of conformity notwithstanding, some of the orthodox Marxist-Leninists themselves made distinctive practical and theoretical contributions to Marxism.

The very possibility of applying Marxist revolutionary theory to Africa and generally to the European colonial realm depended on innovation within Marxist theory, if not necessarily innovation led by African and other colonial subjects. Marxists, as bearers of a doctrine concerned with revolution under advanced capitalism, had to explain Marxism’s relevance to Europe’s underdeveloped colonies – and sub-Saharan Africa represented an acute instance of a region that was definitely not economically developed or even, outside South Africa, subject to the sort of ‘combined and uneven’ development that brought pockets of urban proletarian modernity to imperial Russia.

As is well known, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels expected the proletarian revolution to break out and socialism to be established, in advanced capitalist societies. They allowed that societies with recently strong communal traditions (notably Russia) might be able to skip capitalism, but they never developed this thought into a theory (Cox 1966: 47–48; Marx 1881). Leon Trotsky and Vladimir Lenin took a different route to justify revolution in largely agrarian Russia: they argued that Russia had too weak a liberal bourgeoisie to establish a successful bourgeois-democratic order, yet just enough of capitalism and a working class to enable workers and peasants to take power. The nature of their revolution remained for long unclear, but Lenin came increasingly round to Trotsky’s view that it would be socialist rather than bourgeois-democratic (Liebman 1975: 62–83, 180–189). While they believed Russia was ripe for revolution, both Lenin and Trotsky thought that the post-revolutionary
state’s survival, and certainly its flourishing, would depend on supportive proletarian revolutions breaking out in more advanced capitalist societies. It was the failure of these to materialise, and the prospect of an isolated socialist Russia, that prompted communists to turn their attention to the colonies (Cox 1966: 47–48; Drew 2000: 95; Padmore 1964: 225). Some began to think that the world capitalist system might be sooner and more successfully attacked at its weak colonial link than in its metropolitan heartland. During the 1920s, the Moscow-led Communist International threw its weight behind the aspiration of colonised people to national independence.

In the decades after World War II the Soviet Union and the international communist movement faced an exciting new circumstance: a decolonising Africa and Asia falling into the hands of post-colonial leaders who were often determined to build socialism. The Soviets remained orthodox enough Marxists to doubt whether the newly independent countries were ready to embark on socialist construction. They nevertheless adapted their theory sufficiently to enable them to take advantage of new opportunities to project Moscow’s influence abroad. Soviet theorists began to argue in the 1950s that a ‘non-capitalist’ path of development had been opened for Third World countries by the presence of an international socialist bloc led by a relatively advanced Soviet Union. Later Soviet theorists posited the possibility of ‘societies of socialist orientation’. While this theoretical refinement rationalised close ties with Marxist–Leninist regimes in Africa, its formulators remained somewhat doubtful about the prospects for socialism, as opposed to Moscow-friendly regimes, in Africa. Naturally, the Soviet Union’s proud Marxist–Leninist allies in Africa did not share their scepticism (Cox 1966: 49–50; Halliday and Molyneux 1981: 277–283; Keller 1987: 5–6; Somerville 1986: 194–196).

Africa’s Marxist–Leninist leaders and attendant thinkers themselves mostly applied a single template to the continent. Though eager socialists, they acknowledged that Africa was not immediately capable of achieving full socialism, let alone communism. The initial phase of revolution was ‘national democratic’ and would yield what Marxist ideologues termed ‘people’s democracy’ or ‘people’s democratic dictatorship’. People’s democracy would eliminate feudal vestiges and, bypassing the capitalist stage of development, lay the basis for socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Political leadership during this stage would fall to a vanguard party representing an alliance of workers, peasants and the progressive petite bourgeoisie. Workers would be the leading element in the alliance but, in the absence of a substantial proletariat,
their leading role would in effect be exercised by proxy through the party. This core class alliance might cooperate with other social elements where tactically necessary, but it would fight any existing or aspirant classes that blocked progress to socialism (Somerville 1986: 99). Such was, roughly speaking, the path that all ‘societies of socialist orientation’ were expected to ply according to a Marxist script shaped over decades by Lenin’s theories of imperialism and national self-determination, the experience of popular-front politics in the 1930s through to the mid-1940s and post-war Soviet foreign policy. In this respect African Marxists had little distinctive to offer: they considered that the above represented a universal formula, albeit one that required local adjustments.

African-based academic Marxism was in some instances more independent-minded and willing to challenge orthodox Marxist templates, helping itself to theoretical advances within non-Soviet Western Marxism and reproducing some of its debates. For example, South African academe in the late 1970s and early 1980s saw debates between E.P. Thompson-style social historians and structuralists influenced by Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas. With some notable exceptions (for example, the influence of Marxist academics on ‘workerist’ trade unionism in South Africa in the 1970s), academic Marxism was nonetheless marginal to actual political developments. Trotskyist groups too, were small, as were other left oppositions and in any case, most of these groups competed for the mantle of true Marxism–Leninism rather than seeking to challenge it. They sometimes invoked left-libertarian councilist and syndicalist strands within Marxism, but did not for the most part eschew party vanguardism or celebrate political pluralism.

Ironically, Africa’s ostensibly orthodox Marxist regimes and movements may have displayed a greater originality. Perhaps the most idiosyncratic was General Siad Barre’s attempt to synthesise Marxism and Islam (Samatar 1988: 108–109; Library of Congress c.2005).27 The philosophico-theological innovations of Siad Barre echo, though within a more explicitly Marxist discourse, the earlier efforts of Algeria’s Ben Bella and his successor Houari Boumedienne to develop an ‘Arabo-Islamic’ socialism (Humbaraci 1966: 90, 109, 237–270). While these amounted to explicit syntheses, most socialist and Marxist movements operating in Muslim-majority societies felt compelled to accommodate Islam to one degree or another. Notwithstanding his confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser benefited from the theological support of the ulema, the country’s official religious leaders (Woodward
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And Islam remained the official religion, taught in schools, of the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (Lackner 1985: 109–110).

The EPLF and TPLF made an interesting addition to Marxist thinking on the national question. The EPLF insisted that nations had a right to secession even from socialist states, while the TPLF proposed that African states should recognise national differences and constitute themselves where necessary on a multinational basis. In both cases the movements were invoking Leninist norms, but these were, at best, inconsistently applied in the Soviet Union and were positively frowned upon in post-independence Africa, with its insistence on ethnicity-transcending nation-building and its aversion to the rearrangement of existing state boundaries. The EPLF and TPLF took these ideas very seriously, as the former showed when it brought about Eritrean secession, the latter in its governing practice at the head of Ethiopia’s ruling EPRDF (Pool 1979: 56–71; Young 1997: 214).

On an institutional level, Africa’s most baleful innovation may appear to be military-coup Marxism. Although there have been non-African instances of Marxists coming to power by military coup (for example, Afghanistan and Grenada in the late 1970s), Africa was undoubtedly the chief exemplar of this form. Whether it was also a pioneer depends on how one classifies the economically nationalist, left-leaning regimes installed by militaries in countries such as Syria and Burma in the 1960s. While these regimes were not orthodox and explicitly Marxist they certainly bore kinship with some later African Marxist military regimes. The true prototype for this more hybrid left-nationalist form may however itself be in an African country: the socialist-oriented Nasserite regime in Egypt, established by a coup in 1952.

I have already mentioned another, earlier instance of institutional innovation, Touré’s experimentation with the mass-party. This form, like the Marxist–Leninist party, assumed that popular democratic participation would unfold within a unitary polity, either within the ruling party or guided by it. A more pluralistic institutional innovation occurred in Madagascar. There, a military-civilian regime, in a formula possibly unique in the world, permitted a competitive multi-party democracy limited to socialist and Marxist parties. To qualify for admission to electoral politics, parties had to subscribe to a founding revolutionary document, the Charter of Malagasy Revolution. While the regime established its own party, the Avant Guard of the Malagasy Revolution (Arema), it joined its cooperative competitors in a National Front for the Defence of the Revolution (Covell 1987: 1–2, 60–62,
119). This pluralism-within-the-left arrangement instantiated the sort of politics that some more democratic-minded revolutionary leftists advocated from time to time in the last century. Malagasy Marxism was more generally eclectic; in the early 1980s, for example, it sought a philosophical rapprochement with Christianity, which in Madagascar had developed along fairly progressive lines.

Malagasy Marxists never turned their pluralistic formula into a theory: indeed many were Leninists who saw their political system as a temporary and rather unsatisfactory compromise dictated by circumstances. Even so it represented, by comparison with other, more rigid African Marxisms, a not wholly unattractive accident.

Few of these innovations had a lasting influence. Some, like Madagascar’s, never spread beyond its country of origin. Others died with African socialism and African Marxism. If there is a Marxist African revolutionary who still holds many in his thrall it is probably Frantz Fanon, the Martinique-born, adoptively Algerian revolutionary thinker. Fanon’s unorthodox Marxism, originating in the moment of African socialism and in Marxist existentialism and humanism, speaks directly to the contemporary intellectual climate of the radical left. His defence of violence as therapeutic is generally downplayed by his current supporters for normatively good reasons, but it placed him alongside Georges Sorel as one of the two most explicit and striking celebrants of violence within the history of left-wing revolutionary thought. Fanon’s anticipation that the African nationalist elite would sell out the revolution, replacing the colonial oppressor with a new indigenous one, is generally taken as prescient. Perhaps the main reason for Fanon’s renewed popularity is that he speaks to ‘post-colonialist’ theoretical concerns with the West’s discursive construction of the Other. Fanon’s depiction of colonialism as a psychopathological force that crushes indigenous cultures and induces natives to internalise the objectifying white gaze serves as one important starting point for the identity-based, sometimes nationalist-tinged cultural politics that seems to have expanded into the activist-cum-intellectual space vacated by economistic Marxism. Exactly what socio-historical alternative Fanonism offers, beyond a general exhortation to resist cultural colonialism and post-independence leadership betrayal, remains up for debate.28
The failure of the Marxist–Leninist regimes was a product of flawed domestic choices rather than of ‘scarcity plus encirclement’.

The life of African Marxism was pretty short. Most of the Marxist regimes were set up in the mid-1970s and most had begun to liberalise economically by the mid-1980s. During 1990 and 1991 almost all of them renounced Marxism and embraced representative democracy (Hall and Young 1997: 202–219; Hodges 2001: 50–59, 70–102; Waterhouse 1996: 11). African socialism’s commencement dated back further – to the later 1950s – but its remaining regimes followed a similar trajectory of decline and redefinition in the later 1980s and early 1990s. The overwhelming consensus amongst participants and observers was that the Marxist and African-socialist experiments had both failed. None of the socialist economies had escaped underdevelopment; some ended the 1980s amongst the world’s most destitute.

As earlier noted, formerly Marxist or Marxist-influenced movements that came to power in the 1980s and 1990s did not even attempt to institute socialist experiments. Some might see in Zimbabwe’s post-2000 land seizures a reprise of the ‘Marxist-Leninist-Maoist’ radicalism of Robert Mugabe’s guerrilla-war days, but the episode is better understood (ideologically speaking) as an instance of crisis-driven racial nationalism. Whatever the precise ideological content of Zanu’s radicalism, its economic results have been calamitous and there is little evidence of either a popular or an elite push across Africa to replicate it.

So what happened to the attempt to build socialism in Africa? And does its abandonment offer lessons for attempts in the current (unpropitious) time to advance a left-social democratic project, in Africa or elsewhere?

It is possible to identify a range of factors that contributed to the failure of the African socialist and African Marxist regimes.

Some of these fit the classic ‘scarcity plus encirclement’ scenario that sympathisers often use to explain the difficulties faced by leftist governments. Socialist governments in Africa inherited undeveloped agrarian economies in which growth had centred on a few enclaves. Colonial education systems generated scandalously few skilled people, the ranks of whom were further depleted when settlers and expatriates in Guinea-Conakry, Mozambique and Angola fled after independence. A long history of land degradation in the Ethiopian
highlands was at least contributory to the famine of 1983–1986 in which a million people died (Kebbede 1992; Ottoway 1990: 4). The MPLA and Frelimo faced extremely costly, externally backed armed insurgencies that wrecked promising social programmes. Ethiopia was invaded by US-backed Somalia in 1977 and challenged from within by armed secessionists; the Somali regime and the Derg were both finally toppled by insurgents in 1991. Angola and the Horn of Africa became cold-war battlegrounds while apartheid South Africa spread ‘destabilisation’ across much of southern Africa. Though commentators from the late 1980s began, properly, to underline the extent to which socialist governments brought their difficulties upon themselves (Kaure 1999: 2–3; Saul 1993a), inherited underdevelopment and (once underway) military pressure were enough on their own to render economic reconstruction formidably difficult under any ideological rubric.

Endogenous failings were nevertheless many. One was a radical impatience that led African socialists and Marxists to require too much, too soon of states that were hampered by insufficient skilled personnel and other resources. Overconfident socialist rulers did not hesitate to vest the central planning of entire economies in the hands of flimsy state systems. They also overestimated the capacity of their societies to industrialise rapidly from a low base in a context of capital and skill shortages and limited economies of scale. The fallout of this over-ambition included bureaucratic paralysis, loss-making enterprises and, in several cases, high levels of debt. Given what we know now about the necessity for some sort of market under feasible socialism, it would have been more prudent for these governments to provide space for private enterprise while developing the state’s capacity to collect revenue, supply social benefits, redistribute wealth and engage in overall economic steering. And given the costs and uncertainty attending large-scale, capital-intensive projects, it would have been more sensible not to take on external debt to finance them. Rapid debt accumulation was the undoing of socialism in Benin and Madagascar (Allen 1989; Covell 1987: 63–68).

In keeping with their radical ambition, socialist governments overestimated the ripeness of the countryside for fast-track socialism or indeed rapid modernisation. Socialist incumbents tried, understandably, to rearrange rural life to facilitate welfare provision, higher productivity, egalitarian land distribution and social cooperation – and in Ethiopia, in the mid-1980s, simply to avoid mass starvation (Kebbede 1992: 79–84). The methods they chose to achieve these objectives were generally disliked by rural populations. It is not
that the peasants were pro-capitalist: they did not, for the most part, want a free market in land and opposed attempts by the TPLF in Ethiopia and Frelimo in Mozambique to introduce one in the 1990s; they mostly welcomed redistribution of land from state holdings and big landowners (Ottoway and Ottoway 1986: 139–142; Waterhouse 1996: 23; Young 1997: 198–199). At the same time, peasants did not usually wish to work on cooperatives or collective farms or, in Ethiopia, to be relocated to supposedly more fertile land hundreds of miles away. Faced with peasant reluctance to join such arrangements, Marxist governments, like some of their African-socialist predecessors, resorted to force. Many peasants also resented the way urban-based leaders disparaged entrenched animist beliefs and sidelined traditional leaders, often coercively.

Peasant agriculture suffered from a range of factors that were not fully under state control, from drought and war to shortages of capacity, but the use of coercion against peasants must be counted as a reckless forfeiture of goodwill. If there is a clear message from countries like Mozambique, but also, say, Afghanistan under the Soviets, it is that urban elites need to treat the countryside and its ways with care, employing methods of consultation and persuasion wherever possible rather than force, in realising modern values. Alienation of peasants directly fuelled armed opposition in Mozambique, Angola and Ethiopia and passive non-cooperation in other cases.

It is generally striking how ready Marxist regimes were to alienate, gratuitously, whole swathes of the societies they sought to govern. Until the mid-1980s the governments of Mozambique and (to a lesser degree) Angola harassed already suspicious Christian churches, guaranteeing their outright hostility. While foreign capital was courted, domestic capital often faced an undifferentiating animus. The honing of vanguard parties required systematic purges that isolated party elites from society (Hodges 2001: 48; Radu and Somerville 1989: 172–173; Somerville 1986: 56–57, 90, 92–95). Ethnic identity was demeaned, for example, by denial of indigenous language rights, while ethnic out-groups were under-represented in state bodies. Eritrean demands for independence were ignored by a Derg determined to transform the Ethiopian empire into an effectively unitary state (Iyob 1995: 118–119; Keller 1988: 202–203, 240; Ottoway 1990: 607). Clearly, socialist governments were convinced that, in imposing modernisation, history was on their side. When things went wrong, they needed scapegoats. Nor should we forget how much more left-sympathetic was the temper of the 1960s and 1970s – a temper conducive to what Saul called 'cockiness' (Saul 1993b: 72–73). But whatever the explanation, the politics seem desperately inept.
A comprehensive diagnosis of African socialism and African Marxism’s lack of success is made difficult because it lay at the intersection of two larger failures: of Marxist governance globally, and of African governance irrespective of ruling ideology. It is fair to say, though, that the African-socialist and Marxist regimes bore the imprint of both failures: those stemming from post-independence Africa’s economic marginality, ethno-regional complexity and state weakness together with those engendered by Marxism–Leninism’s totalitarian tendencies, centralising statism and ambitious industrial modernism.

**THESIS SIX**

The authoritarianism of the Marxist–Leninist regimes was a product less of their weak commitment to democracy than of their flawed theory of democracy.

African Marxism’s failure was, to an important extent, a failure in its theory and practice of democracy. Socialist movements and regimes considered popular participation necessary to the realisation of democratic values and to the canalisation of popular energies into development tasks. Their democratic idealism impressed not a few observers, as did the neighbourhood committees, workplace councils, peasant associations and sectoral mass organisations established in liberated zones and within the jurisdiction of the new socialist states. Some observers thought that this participatory democracy more than compensated for the absence of representative-democratic institutions. Yet it is clear, now, that this democracy was a sham. In the playing out of the dialectic between leadership and mass action referred to by Saul and others, a commandist concept of leadership seemed relatively quickly to win out once socialists were in power. The result was a downgrading of participatory democracy (Hall and Young 1997: 74–76; Ottoway and Ottoway 1986: 200–207; Saul 1990: 55). In many cases its demotion was prompted by the fact that factional opponents of the government or military – youth-wing militants in Congo, oppositionists in Benin’s Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, leftist conspirators in Luanda’s **poder popular**, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party in Ethiopia’s neighbourhood **kebeles** – had established bases in the participatory organs. In other cases participatory organs, like the **grupos dinamizadores** in...
Mozambique and workers’ self-management bodies in Algeria, Angola and Mozambique, were sacrificed to governments’ scramble for discipline and centralised coordination.³⁵

More important, these organs were part of a misconceived model of democracy in the first place. When African-socialist and African Marxist regimes spoke of participation they meant mobilisation of the population to realise collective ends, defined by a ruling party. To be sure, this might require popular input through discussion and criticism, and such input might influence the choice between regime-vetted candidates, the technical details of policies and even the clauses of constitutions.³⁶ But participants were not meant to, nor could they, challenge the ruling party or its ideological direction. For the regime, participatory bodies served primarily as venues to explain already-decided policies; alternatively, as mechanisms for co-opting dissent and subjecting the population to surveillance (Ciment 1997: 145). The so-called ‘mass organisations’ of youth, workers, women and others were designed, for their part, to function as transmission belts between the regime and the population.³⁷ With a few exceptions, no autonomous associations were allowed to develop outside them.³⁸ Nor were there other, compensating checks on the concentration of power. Elected national representative assemblies served as rubber stamps.³⁹ Leninist democratic centralism eviscerated internal party democracy (Giorgis 1990: 62–63; Radu and Somerville 1989: 192–193; Saul 1985: 78–79). Ruling parties were anyway invariably subordinated to powerful presidencies or (in Congo and Somalia) to military cabals.⁴⁰

A deeper democratic philosophy informed the operation of the participatory bodies. The democracy the socialist regimes put in place was teleological rather than representative. Its architects sought a state structured around the singular goal of building socialism rather than one enabling citizens to choose among diverse collective projects. If the system ‘represented’ anyone it was not an actual, but an ideal, or higher people: that is, the people as they would think and act if they were free of false consciousness and able to apprehend their real interests or the real good of society. In this sense, Africa’s socialist regimes made a Rousseauian distinction between the will of all and the general will, with the party embodying the latter thanks to its scientific grasp and far-sightedness.⁴¹

The theory and practice of democracy in African Marxist states (Madagascar apart) differed in no significant way from that operative in the generality of Marxist–Leninist regimes extant until 1989–1991. It can be described as the Leninist approach to democracy, legitimated by the particular interpretation
that the Bolsheviks and subsequently the Communist Party of the Soviet Union gave to the often ambiguous work of Marx and Engels, generalised globally by the Comintern (Glaser 1999). In the end, this conception was not sustainable because it failed to take account of irreducible social diversity, whether of values or interests and because it left regimes open to delegitimation by enemies—Western governments, local insurgents—who plausibly portrayed them as oppressive dictatorships. In the early 1990s several (ex-) socialist governments and movements discarded the teleological democratic model in favour of a more open-ended, representative one. In these cases citizens can now, at least in principle, choose amongst competing collective projects embodied in rival programmes and parties. This is the framework, bereft of guarantees of power, in which socialist or social-democratic parties of the future will have to seek office. It means governing only with the revocable consent of actual, empirical peoples.

**THESIS SEVEN**

Marxism can have a useful future in progressive politics only as one ideological and discursive source amongst others.

It not only seems futile, but is morally wrong, to seek to resurrect the Marxist–Leninist state in the twenty-first century. In Africa, that form of state denied its people elementary democratic rights, bankrupted economies and, in the worst cases, brought in its tow civil war, interstate war and famine—all for highly questionable gains that could arguably have been secured (and then some) by more humane and democratic methods.

It does not follow that socialism, or indeed Marxism, has no place in a progressive contemporary politics. The fact that Africa’s capitalism generates such vast venality and inequality is proof enough of the need for an opposition to the status quo that can offer a vision of a more egalitarian, participatory and caring future. Still, we should not think of that as a specifically Marxist, or even Marxist-inspired, future. Marxism has useful critical points to make about capitalism’s crisis-prone nature, the human cost of hyper-commoditisation and profit-driven economics, the threat to democratic equality posed by unequal economic power and the failure of democracy to penetrate the ‘hidden abode’ of capitalist production. But Marxism also gets crucial things wrong. Reducing
the political to class dynamics, it cannot comprehend the value of the so-called ‘bourgeois’ democratic liberties in limiting despotic power and enabling all citizens, the poor included, to organise in defence of their interests. Guided by a sense of history as impelled by material reality rather than ideas, it offers no comfortable space for moral and ethical reasoning, especially concerning the limits of what can be done to individuals in pursuing grand social goals. Marxism’s immanent critique of the environmentally destructive consequences of self-propelled capital accumulation is vitiated by its preoccupation with the ever-expanding human productivity demanded by communism. Marxist theory offers little guidance on the organisation of a feasible socialist economy.

Because of these flaws and limits – the repercussions of most of which were visible in the period of African Marxist governance – Marxism is defensible today only as one ideological and discursive source amongst others within a democracy-respecting oppositional culture. Within such a culture, it can be joined in fruitful dialogue with democratic liberalism about the proper relationship between procedural and substantive democracy, with analytical political philosophy about the meaning of social justice and with social democracy, ecologism and other currents about the shape of a sustainable mixed economy harnessed to social needs. These are just some of the possible dialogic axes.

This last thesis has departed from the African materials, allowing itself a more general and prescriptive bent. But it is, I think, the upshot of any proper consideration of the African Marxist experiment with power, as well as of any more wide-ranging reflection upon the lessons of Marxist government and the limits of Marxist theory. It is thus the right way to conclude.

NOTES
3 See Nyerere (1964: 242); Dia (1964: 249); Nkrumah (1963: 124, 130); Nkrumah (1964b: 263).
Marxisms in the twenty-first century


12 On Ethiopian exceptionalism, see Halliday and Molyneux (1981) and Lefort (1983).


22 I am here primarily concerned with Marxist movements and their attendant ideologies, rather than with academic Marxism.

27 The only other significant movement I know to attempt something similar is the People's Mojahedin (Mojahedin-e-Khalq) in Iran.
28 See Fanon (1965); Fanon (1967a); Fanon (1967b); Fanon (1967c). On whether Fanon was a critic of nationalism or sought to radicalise it, see the survey and intervention by Lazarus (1993). On Fanon's democratic thought (which basically amounted to advocating participatory decentralisation within a non-liberal, most likely one-party regime), see Adam (1993). For a critique of Fanon on violence, see Kebbede (2001). On Fanon more generally, see Gibson (2003) and Tronto (2004). The renewed popularity of Steve Biko also owes something to this Fanonian moment.
29 The beneficiaries of the land seizures included landless peasants but also politically connected, aspirant large-scale landowners; its victims were white farmers but also black foreign nationals and black workers evicted from farms. The rhetoric accompanying the seizures was more anti-colonial, anti-white, anti-urban and xenophobic than Marxist or socialist. No effort was made to establish state or collective farms. The seizures are best seen as part of the larger effort by the Mugabe regime to Africanise the country's mixed market economy.
41 During the transition to socialism and communism, strictly speaking the regime presumed to represent the higher will of only the proletariat and its class allies, though they in turn supposedly served as intimations and forebears of a still-to-come classless people.

REFERENCES


