

Introduction to the new SMPC theme group

This research programme aims to address new social movements and organizational forms in Africa against the background of the continent's changing political cultures. It will provide a general, open-ended framework for research aimed at answering a number of questions:

- why and how people seek modes of social, cultural and political expression in new organizational forms;
- what the new developments are in the political cultures and governance structures of the continent, and, more specifically, why democratization processes have not been very successful;
- how insecurity takes on new forms and why certain violent conflicts persist; and
- why 'traditional' ideologies and social mechanisms of mediation and tolerance seem to diminish in force, be reinvented, or become problematic in new contexts; how African populations struggle to keep their inherited socio-cultural and survival mechanisms, and how and why they redefine ideals of modernity, development and belonging in their own terms.

The programme considers conditions of international flows of people, resources and capital, Africa's place in the global system, and the dynamics of local ideologies, emerging social networks, political struggles and cultural change. The research perspective is multi-disciplinary and the approach interactionist: viewing history, structure and human agency as interlocking factors. While the execution of the programme is based on empirical academic research, cooperation is sought with policy-making institutions and persons (NGOs, international organizations, ministries) to develop specific research questions and approaches that may yield insights that could be used in improving policy plans and initiatives. As to academic exchange, the theme group's programme will connect with African visiting scholars and our existing partners in Africa.

Africa is a highly diverse and pluralist continent defying unitary approaches, but we depart from the observation that most Sub-Saharan countries are experiencing continued changes and challenges in the political, social, ecological-economic and psychological sphere that produce both new insecurities and opportunities. The extensive literature on the 'problems of Africa' testifies to this. States are claimed to be failing, large numbers of people are affected by, and agents in, long-lasting and often violent conflicts, economies and livelihoods are faltering and cannot keep up with demographic change or demands from the large majority of people, and last but not least, the scars of conflict and humiliation have marked people's psychological states and bruised cultural values. The other side of the coin is the wide range of innovative answers to enhance survival and the creation of wealth, ranging from the new use of political and technical means, global flows (i.e. migration, circulation, resources, money) and modernist images and strategies applied on the basis of social and cultural resources, such as kinship, social networking, application and the use of new technologies,¹ popular culture or religion. Research should also address African problems and phenomena as defined both by Africans and by outsiders, as well as the dominant images of and frequent misperceptions about the continent.

Africa in the past few years has seen continued insecurities and struggles in the domains of economic life, politics, governance and the public sphere. It is important to understand the historical and socio-cultural background of this, making use of recently gained cumulative insights, and to chart the ways that phenomena like power struggles, problems of state survival, religiously based activism or militancy, ethnicity and its political role, the changing role of youth, and patterns of popular revolt and resistance play in the public and ideological sphere in African countries. In addition, it has become clear that analysis of the manifest or formal institutional spheres of politics in Africa, in contrast to that of the informal and ideational spheres, usually does not suffice to explain the facts. Related to this there is the need to continuously reassess the interactions of Africa

¹ See the research programme of the ASC's Connection and Transformations theme group.

with the rest of the world.² Considering the international dimension of Africa's position and political future is crucial for the debates on the socio-political, not only economic, foundations of the global system as it is (re)shaped by donor-country pressure, global regimes of development policies/ideals, human rights discourses and religious expansionism.

Defining political culture, new social movements and profiles

The general focus of the new theme group will be on social movements, emerging new (groups of) actors and their profiles, as well as changing political cultures in Africa, with research being done on a selected number of countries. Movements in many instances appear to be the significant social actors in current conditions of change. Attention is to be paid to individual action, collective movements, and cultural and historical patterns shaping behaviour. Political and economic liberalization processes have had a profound impact and indeed a certain causative influence on the emergence of new – or the transformation of existing – social movements and profiles. These wider global processes have since interacted with the evolution of different social movements and profiles in ways that remain largely unclear. Studying the impact of these politico-economic and social processes – liberalization for short – is therefore closely bound up with the essence of the social movements/profiles the new theme group aims to study.

The central concept of social movements is taken as a general term referring to movements of contestation, resistance or protest, or alternatively forming social orders at a local level, that may coalesce into more organized movements with political claims or socio-cultural ideals and programmes. A more specific definition of social movements could be adopted: networks of groups, individuals and organizations prepared to mobilize for collective aims or protest actions to promote or resist social change, opposed to state authorities or institutions, and formulating alternative social and political practices/trajectories. In some projects, this means following a 'down-up' research approach. Social movements have a variety of origins and are characterized by a quest for new frames of meaning that refer to social and cultural characteristics and which can have implicit or explicit political dimensions.³

The concept does not exclusively refer here to trade unions, associations, liberation movements or civil society organizations (although they are part of the broader, established spectrum of social movements), but primarily to new, emerging forms of collective social action and mobilization initiated by either individuals, marginalized groups, occupational or religious groups, ethnic revival groups, popular culture movements or even social or political elites.⁴ It is a dynamic concept indicating the formation and development of social agents and their careers or their claims to power, authority or relevance, and which (re)define political arenas, networks and ideological or cultural repertoires. The background against which they emerge is not only formed by long-term domestic socio-political problems but also by contemporary aspects of globalization, which in Africa also entails the rapidly growing role of China (and other Asian countries) on the African continent, and often evokes counter-responses by ordinary Africans.

Social movements have been well studied in the European and Latin American context but only sporadically in African contexts, mainly in South Africa.⁵ We feel that current developments across African societies invite researchers: to try and explain their dynamics through the lens of

² See, for instance, the 2005 Council on Foreign Relations report, *More Than Humanitarianism: A Strategic U.S. Approach toward Africa*, Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations (Independent Task Force Report #56).

³ We here extend the definition given by D. McAdam *et al.* in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 186).

⁴ The recent book edited by J. Nash, *Social Movements. An Anthropological Reader* (Malden-Oxford-Carlton, Austr.: Blackwell, 2005) is about both types of social movements. Cf. also D. della Porta & M. Diani, *Social Movements. An Introduction* (Malden-Oxford-Carlton, Austr.: Blackwell, 2006). A more political interpretation is taken by Ch. Tilly in *Social Movements, 1768-2004* (Boulder-London: Paradigm Publishers, 2004).

⁵ An exception is M. Mamdani & E. Wamba-dia-Wamba (eds), *African Studies in Social Movements and Democracy* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1995).

social movements and actor profiles, as these show new and often surprising aspects, and to apply insights from the social movements literature as developed in non-African contexts. In combination with the concept of political culture, a broad and heuristically useful framework can be created to research African complexities.

The concept of political culture⁶ is taken to refer to the sphere of governance, politics, power and the state in specific countries, as set in historical and social conditions marked by certain ideologies, values and practices present among the general population and relating to the construction of the political sphere. Political culture thus reflects the nature and extent of the values and representations concerning politics and the public sphere that are present in a certain society or population. It is no doubt a contested concept and may not be taken *a priori* as explanatory but for these very reasons is useful in generating debate and seeking better accounts of political action in its material and cultural-ideological settings.

This programme hopes to address the implications of processes of change and of the adoption of new organizational forms, social ‘technologies’ and power strategies that are currently visible in Africa. These unfold against the backdrop of states, societies and ideational/conceptual systems that are in upheaval and are unlikely to return to their previous semblance of social and cultural cohesion. We intend to pay close attention to African political philosophies and practices which have deep roots in the past but were often seen as irrelevant or disappearing. What has happened is their transformation and reassertion in the political process, thus changing political cultures and the public sphere in African societies, i.e. the arenas of decision-making, the exercise of power, and public debates or contestation.

Attention also needs to be paid to the growing impact of diasporic African communities in the political sphere and their indirect role in the construction of social movements and political debate. The persistent critiques by these transnational communities of the politics of their home country, for example via Internet sites, are having a domestic impact. They also aim to influence the agenda of donor countries. Furthermore, these communities are becoming an economic force due to their transfer of remittances and their contributions to investment, tourism, etc. in the home country. Some states are, in effect, a kind of ‘diaspora state’, a prime example being Eritrea;⁷ while others are feeling obliged to adapt or rhetorically justify their policies towards the critical diaspora.

International relations are also becoming more important in defining African realities and power politics. The international community has not yet found the answers to the changes and problems in the African postcolonial order, and ways of dealing with them and with the political elites in place are highly problematic. In addition, the collapse of the outward, formal political order in several areas of Africa in the past few years (e.g. in Somalia, DR Congo or Ivory Coast) raises concerns as to regional and global security. This process makes it all the more necessary to see how socio-cultural orders, or what remains of them, are locally reconstituted through the actions of individuals and groups pursuing their interests, or how new ‘trust networks’⁸ are achieved and made politically relevant. The role of trust networks is essential among, for example, criminal groups, religious militants, and autocratic ethnic and political elites.

A central concern in the research of political culture and social movements is charting the multiple aspects of insecurity (human, existential, cognitive, political and ecological-economic) that seem to characterize contemporary African societies in new and often dramatic forms (cf. Somalia, Darfur, Chad). Relevant conditions here are the transformations of the state, the informalization of the economy after economic and political liberalization, including the fragmentation of authority and the growth of transnational crime networks,⁹ resource contestation, the conflict sensitivity of African societies, the demographic crisis upsetting the population pyramid (especially as a result of

⁶ Cf. R.W. Inglehart, ‘Political Culture’, in: J.R. Baldwin *et al.*, *Redefining Culture: Perspectives across the Disciplines* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005, pp. 127-35).

⁷ See R. Iyob (2000), ‘The Ethiopian-Eritrean Conflict: Diasporic vs. Hegemonic States in the Horn of Africa, 1991-2000’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 38 (4): 659-82.

⁸ Cf. C. Tilly, *Trust and Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁹ See for a recent UN report: http://www.unodc.org/pdf/African_report.pdf.

HIV/AIDS deaths in a crucial age range, but against the background of rapid numerical growth), which is resulting in deepening poverty and limiting chances of recovery, and the dissonance between externally induced/imported political ideas and practices *vis-à-vis* indigenous or neo-traditionalist political ideologies.

The theme group follows a multi-disciplinary approach, based on work within various participating disciplines¹⁰ that reflect the expertise of the theme-group members (political science, human geography, anthropology/sociology and contemporary history). The aim is to work closely with African research partners in the countries where we do research as well as with visiting fellows from Africa. Projects with PhD students working on SMPC topics will continue, and new ones discussed. Research into the overarching topic of political culture and social movements and their interaction will culminate in an edited book by members of the new theme group.

¹⁰ Disciplines are, in our view, no more than evolved traditions of asking questions or addressing research problems in a certain way, guided by shared core concepts and approaches.