DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN AFRICA: INTERROGATING PARADIGMS AND PRACTICES

by

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Introduction

Democracy is a model. Democratization is a process. Democracy is a transplant. Democratization is organic. By democracy I mean the concept of bourgeois liberal democracy imposed by the West on the Rest. By democratization I mean the struggles of the Rest against the West and its local "implants" to expand the sphere of human freedom and dignity.

Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1492 and blazed the trail for Western invasion of Africa and Asia. Christopher Columbus landed in Hispaniola (modern day Haiti and Dominican Republic) also in 1492 planting the seeds of first genocide of the original inhabitants of the Americas, the so-called Red Indians, and the most gruesome trade: the triangular, Atlantic slave trade. Thus began the next five centuries of the development of the world capitalist system and Western civilisation, with accumulation in the centre and dispossession in the periphery. The stories we tell our children and the history we teach them and the values we preach at the altar are spurned by the hegemonic West. This is called civilisation, progress, universal human rights, development, modernization and now globalization. The process of resistance against dispossession is called barbarism, cannibalism, nativism, witchcraft, juju, tribalism and terrorism. Thus goes on the story of the West and the Rest to this day as we meet here to discuss the liberal model of

democracy, good governance, human rights, transparency, accountability, humanitarianism etc.

This grossly oversimplified introduction is meant to drive home the point that concepts and paradigms in our discourse on democracy cannot and ought not to be taken for granted. The discourse is contentious and that contention cannot be unraveled unless we locate it historically in social struggles. The liberal model of democracy which is the dominant political discourse in Africa today is an abstraction from the particular history of the struggles of the European peoples. That it is presented and accepted as universal is because the hegemony of the West over the Rest. And that hegemony premised on the capitalist system was attained through war and violence and continues to be maintained through the same means.

In this short presentation, I want to paint in broad strokes three themes which run through the discourse on democracy. First, the construction of models of democracy - liberal democracy and its variants like social democracy - in imperial centers and its historical context and socio-economic basis. Second, I will address the post-colonial period in Africa. This period neatly subdivides into two - the first twenty-five years of the 'nationalist' period and the second twenty-five years of the neo-liberal period. Lastly, I will look at the way forward or 'what is to be done?' And this I would like to do by reviewing the debates among African scholars. Given the limited time available, I will skip the details and elaborate argumentation. Those who are interested may wish to refer to the selected bibliography I append at the end of the paper.

Construction of democracy 'models' in imperial centers

First, the liberal democracy model which in historical terms is the oldest, was constructed in Europe over a long period of transition from feudalism to capitalism from the end of the 16th to the end of the 19th centuries. Economically, it marked the rise of the bourgeoisie and its eventual triumph following successful industrialization. Politically, the liberal democratic model was developed in

opposition to the absolutist rule of monarchs, including the ideological/cultural hegemony of the Church.

The feudal state was a decentralized parochial state. Rulers derived their legitimacy from religious ideology, that is, the metaphysical instance was dominant. The feudal order was based on status and therefore on inherent inequality since statuses were hierarchically organised. Some of the fundamental building blocks of the bourgeois order and liberal democracy were constructed in opposition to the premises of the feudal order. It is the bourgeoisie that built a **centralized** state, thus laying the basis of what we today call the 'nation'. Some of the other central concepts of the liberal order were similarly constructed in opposition to feudalism. Thus, for instance, privileging of the individual as opposed to a collectivity; equality of the 'individual being' as opposed to the inherent inequality of status; the dominance of the economic instance as opposed to the dominance of the metaphysical instance, thus bourgeois rule is legitimised in and through law and not religion (notice the notion of the secular state). Equality of individuals translates into equality before law which in turn translates into equal rights. Thus all human beings are equal because they possess **equal rights**. Needless to say though that this political and legal equality is superimposed on fundamental social and economic inequality which is inherent in the capitalist system.

The philosophical bedrock of the liberal democracy model rests on several separations and abstractions. First, the separation of production of commodities and circulation of commodities (the market). On the market all commodity owners, sellers and buyers, are equal. In production, the landlord and the tenant, the factory owner and the worker, the merchant and the machinga are of course unequal. In the famous dictum of Anatole France, bourgeois equality means: "The law in its majestic impartiality forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and steal bread."

Result: economic and social inequality which is inherent in the capitalist system makes nonsense of political and legal equality. It is this huge contradiction between

politics and economics, between the reality and the rhetoric, which gave rise to struggles of the working people and produced the other variant of liberal democracy towards the end of the 19th century, social democracy. Social democracy demanded equity not simply equality. These struggles begun in a concrete fashion by the Paris Commune of 1871, passing through social democracy and concluding in the socialist revolution of Russia in 1917, which paused a systemic challenge to both the liberal and social democratic models as well as the capitalist-imperialist system underlying it. Socialist democracy was thus the third form of democracy based on the class of working people and which sought to transcend - albeit unsuccessfully - the liberal and social democratic models.

To sum up, the liberal democratic model sought to be universalized by imperialist-capitalist countries is essentially meant to rationalize, justify and protect and defend private capitalist property so as to reproduce the system of class exploitation. It has been a contentious process giving rise to its variant, the social democratic model, which itself split into social democracy and socialism. The social democratic model, tries to blunt the harsh edges of the liberal democratic model without challenging the capitalist-imperialist system. When it came to the crunch in the 1970s and 1980s, even the most advanced social democracy of the Scandinavian countries, capitulated to the neo-liberal model which I will discuss later. Meanwhile, the socialist model, distorted as it was, collapsed paving way for the renewal of the liberal model in the neo-liberal form.

Second, it is important to note that the liberal democratic model was fully consummated only after industrialization at the end of the 19th century, which laid the basis of the economic development of the imperial centers. The process of industrialization itself was marked by savage exploitation of the working people of Europe and America resulting in gruesome poverty, exploitation and oppression of the working people as archived in many novels and writings such as those of Charles Dickens, Frederick Engels, E. P. Thompson, Robert Tressell, John Steinbeck, etc.

Third, the process of the development of capitalism, which underpinned the liberal democratic model, was global right from its beginning in the 15th century. The pillage of the Americas, Asia and its treasures and the devastation of the African continent, including the slave trade, played a crucial role in the development of imperialist centers.

Fourth, thus capitalism, and its concomitant political expression, liberal democracy, and later social democracy, was built on the backs of the working people of Europe and Americas and the people of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Liberal democracy in the centers went hand in hand with imperialist dictatorship and colonial despotism in the periphery. Democracy and rights were meant for citizens, not natives. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 did not include Africans then because they were 'natives' not human beings.

Fifth, throughout the trajectory of capitalist development, it has been marked by wars and violence. In fact, one author even argues that the cycle of destruction-construction is inherent in the process of capitalist accumulation/development (Jha 2006). The European wars from the 16th to the 19th century culminating in the so-called first and second world wars in the 20th century are notorious. The only period of peace in Europe was about four decades following the second world war. Even then it was peace in Europe and America but war in the third world. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, war returned to Europe (Balkans) and now with Libya, imperialism has once again shifted the theatre of war to Africa. The destruction-construction cycle of capitalist accumulation is well-illustrated by what happened in Iraq and Libya. After ruthless bombing of those countries, the multinational sharks of imperialist countries have invaded Libya for reconstruction like vultures to feed on corpses.

Sixth, the liberal democratic model did not cross the seas during colonialism. Colonialism was anything but democratic. It was a despotic state meant to control, subjugate and dehumanize the colonized so as to facilitate the exploitation of the natural and human resources of the colonies. This in turn gave rise to the struggles

of the colonized for self-determination resulting in the independence of colonies in the global South.

Finally, the golden period of capitalism and the developed North was the four decades following the second world war. In many ways, the Second World War was a turning point. The leadership of the imperialist camp shifted from Britain to the United States. With the Chinese revolution, almost one third of the world withdrew from the capitalist system. The national liberation movement in the South gathered storm as countries in Asia and Africa began to gain their independence. Imperialism was on the defensive and fought hard to keep its hegemony. The Chinese Communist Party summed up the situation thus:

> Countries want independence
> Nations want liberation
> People want revolution.

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It was in this context that African countries won their independence on territories which had been carved out into countries by colonial powers. Independent Africa was born in a very contentious world where socialism challenged capitalism, where nationalism challenged imperialism and where emancipation challenged enslavement. Imperialism was on the defensive but not defeated; socialism had made some impressive revolutionary advances but was not hegemonic, still suffering the birth pangs of being born in economically backward countries. Nationalism had brought *uhuru* but the question was how to defend and nurture it in a hostile environment.

Uhuru and after: from nationalism to neo-liberalism

Fifty years of African independence neatly divide into two periods of 25 years. The first 25 years may be called the nationalist period and the next 25 years of the neo-liberal period. Complex confluence of forces and the long struggle of the peoples led to the granting of independence. But the colonial masters would not simply let go their former colonies. Independence leaders with a modicum of nationalism who

wanted to create relatively independent states were quickly weeded out through assassinations and military coups. Patrice Lumumba was murdered by Belgium in cohorts with the CIA. So was Felix-Roland Moumié, a progressive leader of Union of the People's of Cameroon (UPC) by the French secret services. Mehdi Ben Barka of the Moroccan National Union of Popular Forces, a great Tricontinental leader, disappeared in France in 1965 at the behest of French and Moroccan agents. Amilcar Cabral was killed by Portuguese and the young progressive leader of Burkina Faso Thomas Sankara was also assassinated. Others like Kwame Nkrumah were overthrown for exposing the neo-colonial designs of American imperialism. In 1966 alone there were eight military coups in Africa. In all these, you could trace the hand of imperialist powers. Thus sheer survival was the first pre-occupation of independence leaders. The result was that many quickly recapitulated to the erstwhile Western powers in perpetuating the colonial arrangement that came to be dubbed 'neo-colonialism'. Others of more nationalist and independent bent like Mwalimu Nyerere had to make compromises to survive.

The second challenge was what was called nation-building and development. Given the absence of a bourgeoisie the agency for both became the state. As Mwalimu said, in the former African colonies, the state had both to build the nation and bring about development. But this was the despotic colonial state that was inherited from the past as was the extraverted colonial economy integrated in the capitalist system. The colonial political economy rested on siphoning off of surplus to the metropole through primitive accumulation, not on internal accumulation. And the state acted as the creator and facilitator of conditions for this. No wonder that the new petty bourgeoisie who took the reins of power continued to preside over the same political economy. Attempts to create internal structures for autocentric, albeit capitalist, accumulation that some nationalist leaders like Nyerere attempted very soon reached its limits given that the overall global economic structures were controlled by imperialist centers.

Politically, the liberal construct of the independence constitutions gave way to authoritarian structures mimicking in many ways the despotism of the colonial state. At the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, as many African economies entered the deep economic crisis, it was abundantly clear that the promises of independence had run sour - there was neither sustainable development nor credible democracy. Nonetheless, ideologically and politically imperialism was on the defensive. But the crisis now created the conditions for imperialist powers headed by the United States to mount an offensive in the name of neo-liberalism. This was further facilitated by the decline and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union and the change of direction in China.

For Africa neo-liberalism, economically and philosophically fathered by Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek, and politically rammed down our throats by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, knocked on the doors with structural adjustments programmes (SAPs). Though crafted in the language of economics, neo-liberalism was foremost an ideological attack on radical nationalism. Imperialism went on the offensive - economically, politically, culturally and intellectually. Within a period of two decades, Africa has undergone three generations of structural adjustment programmes in an orgy of liberalization, marketisation, privatisation, commodification and financialisation. Pockets of capitalist development based on internal autocentric accumulation have been destroyed as country after country in Africa has been deindustrialized. The few achievements of social services in education, health, water, old age pensions and other public services are commodified under such policies as cost sharing and outsourcing. Fiscal instruments and institutions of policy making, like central banks, have been made autonomous and commercial banks privatised away from the public scrutiny of elected bodies. They make policies on the basis of prescriptions handed down by International Financial Institutions and donors. Policies are thrust down the throats of politicians and parliamentarians using the carrot of loans, aid and budget support whose withdrawal acts as the veritable stick. Meanwhile, voracious imperialist capitals backed by their states and the so-called "donor-community" is grabbing land, minerals, water, flora and fauna. I need not go into details because a few African scholars

have amply documented these facts - I say few, because many have succumbed to consultancies in the service of "development partners".

It is part of SAP and its conditionalities that we were also given the package of democracy - the liberal democratic model. This is not to say that there were no internal struggles for democratization. There were, but these were quickly hijacked and or pre-empted by local ruling power and their imperialist backers.

Let me now turn to the last section to discuss the democracy discourse which also to a certain extent reflects the struggles for democratization of the African people.

By way of 'the way forward'

At the current conjuncture the democracy discourse/debate among African scholars revolves around three perspectives: (a) the liberal democratic model; (b) the social democratic model and (c) new democracy.

The liberal democratic model handed down from the Centers is simplified for us around such issues as multi-party elections, accountability, transparency, good governance and human rights. This is the dominant discourse among many mainstream African scholars, academia, NGOwallas, political parties and erstwhile "development practitioners", a euphemism for observers and monitors from donor countries. This discourse, much of which actually happens in fora funded by the so-called "development partners" and organised by local NGOs revolves around three or four tired themes - free and fair elections or sometimes called clean elections, transparency and accountability and "good governance". Facilitators and paper presenters at these fora are usually academics who churn out the same tired wisdoms (as I am doing now!) about the need for an independent electoral commission, the need to monitor elections, the need to have legal sanctions against those who breach the rules, strict observance of human and gender rights, and a host of other rights depending on the donor flavour of the day, abolishing of capital punishment, etc.

Every five years elections are held with funding from donors; every five years we get election monitors and observers who certify the elections 'free and fair' or 'moderately free and fair' or 'not free and fair' depending on what is the political attitude of their paymasters for that country and on that occasion; every five years the opposition cries foul; every five years we are told that we need to change the constitution to have an independent, or a multi-party electoral commission, that the commissions need to build their capacity, so a readily available academic consultant from the academia is hired to write a project proposal. And this rigmarole applies regardless of which party has won the election, the ruling or the opposition. The belief that the opposition would do better has been dismally shattered in Africa as in country after country from Zambia through Malawi to Senegal the opposition has proved to be even worse then the outgoing ruling parties. Yet the play-acting goes on.

Much of the discourse on transparency, accountability and good governance is actually a discussion on corruption, the usual 'whipping boy' of donors. The play acting at every "consultative group" and stakeholders workshop is not very different either. Bindra, commenting on a "consultative meeting" in Nairobi in 2005 puts it thus:

> Donor talks to focus on corruption ... Is no one tired if this charade? Year after year, we troop before the donors like abject mendicants asking for "development assistance" (alms, to you and me). Year after year the donors tick us off and point out our various shortcomings. Year after year large sums are promised and smaller sums are delivered. Year after year we squander most of what we are given ... How much longer do we intend to carry on with this failed model of master and supplicant? When an act of futility is repeated incessantly, it must be because it is in the interest of both parties. So see you here at same time next year when the headline will no doubt repeat itself. (quoted in Bujra 2005: 27)

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The point of course is that we hardly interrogate the very basic premises of the liberal democratic model in its historical, social-economic context. Even on its home

turf the model is in crisis as is the capitalist-imperialist system that underpins it. To the credit of a few more committed African scholars, a significant number of them were not taken in by the "good governance" and the liberal democratic package that accompanied the SAP. One of the best and profound African thinkers, the late Archie Mafeje, wrote right at the beginning of the entry of multi-party democracy in the early 1990s:

> All evidence points to the fact that in the so-called 'wave of democratization' sweeping through Africa a new class of compradors will gain ascendancy. They will be largely technocrats who will try their best to ingratiate themselves with the World Bank and to give its Structural Adjustment Programmes in Africa a longer lease of life. Unlike their predecessors, they will be less nationalistic, more pro-West and will espouse some naive and anachronistic ideas about liberal democracy. In the hope of achieving the long-awaited democracy since independence, the people will vote for them as before. But disillusionment will come fast. (Mafeje 1995: 25)

Twenty years down the line, having seen the performance of multi-partyism and the caricatured model of liberal democracy that was handed down to us, we can say with awe: How prophetic?

A small minority of African scholars even toyed with the idea of social democracy Scandinavian-style (Claude Ake, Peter Anyang' Nyongo', for example, see an excellent review in Mafeje 1999). This is to say some kind of welfare state. But a welfare state based on the mode of primitive accumulation imposed by imperialism looks virtually impossible. While there is a lot to be said for this variant, particularly in opposition to liberal democracy which does not address issues of equity and needs, in African conditions it falls short if it does not address the national question, that is the question of imperialism. This is exactly where African scholars advocating social democracy sounded more platitudinous then political. As a matter of fact, it was not long before Nyongo', a founder member of the Social Democratic Party in Kenya, resigned and joined Raila Odinga's Orange Development Movement (ODM).

The third perspective which has been talked about by a minority of African scholars is new democracy. It is interesting that in his 1995 and 1999 articles Mafeje also

saw social democracy as the perspective for African democracy. His understanding of, and argument for social democracy was much more profound.

> Regarding present conditions in Africa, this can refer only to two things: first, the extent to which the people's will enters decisions which affect their life chances; and, second, the extent to which their means of livelihood are guaranteed. In political terms the first demand ... . [implies] ascendancy to power by a national democratic alliance in which the popular classes hold the balance of power. The second demand implies equitable (not equal) distribution of resources. Neither liberal democracy, imposed 'multi-partyism' nor 'market forces' can guarantee these two conditions. It transpires, therefore, that the issue is neither liberal nor 'compradorial' democracy but social democracy. (Mafeje 1995: 26)

In his later article, Mafeje further clarified his concept and perspective on social democracy and brought in the dimension of national liberation and concluded that ''While social democracy cannot be used as a basis for national liberation, new democracy can.' (Mafeje 2000: 87). He further argued that 'new democracy' provides lines of departure from the notions of liberal democracy: recognition of the sovereignty of the people; social justice as opposed to juridical justice; social equity as opposed to legal equality. *And most important of all social equity implies equitable access to productive resources which does not depend on bourgeois notions of private property.*

Taking Mafeje's position on new democracy as a point of departure, I argued in a paper presented on the occasion of the 75th birthday of Mwalimu Nyerere (Shivji 2000), that 'new democracy' in Africa has to be constructed on three fundamental elements - *popular livelihoods, popular participation and popular power*. By popular I mean anti-imperialist. 'National democracy' cannot be 'national' or 'democratic' if it is not at the same time anti-imperialist because imperialism is the anti-thesis of 'nation' and 'democracy'. The term popular as opposed to 'national' is also meant to transcend the limits of the term 'national' to highlight the limits of the first national independence.

The second meaning of 'popular' is to convey the idea that the agency for the new democracy project are popular classes, that is , a bloc of popular classes. The exact

composition will of course vary according to space and time. This is where the concrete analysis of the concrete conditions is called for.

Popular participation is meant to overcome the limits of parliamentary electoral democracy which at best means a musical chairs of changing elites every year. This has proved to be what Samir Amin calls a 'democratic fraud'. Popular participation thus refers to participation of the people in decision-making at their places of production and living which is where politics happen and not simply at the level of the state. This raises the vexed question of the organisational form that the popular agency would take. This is undoubtedly a concrete question and cannot be answered in advance. Nevertheless, on can say with some certainty, that traditional political parties have proved to be utterly inadequate to the task of democratization in the sense of leading a fight of the popular classes for new democracy. Traditional political parties are essentially electoral machines. They are based on opportunistic electoral alliances to get into power and not principled social alliances to transform power.

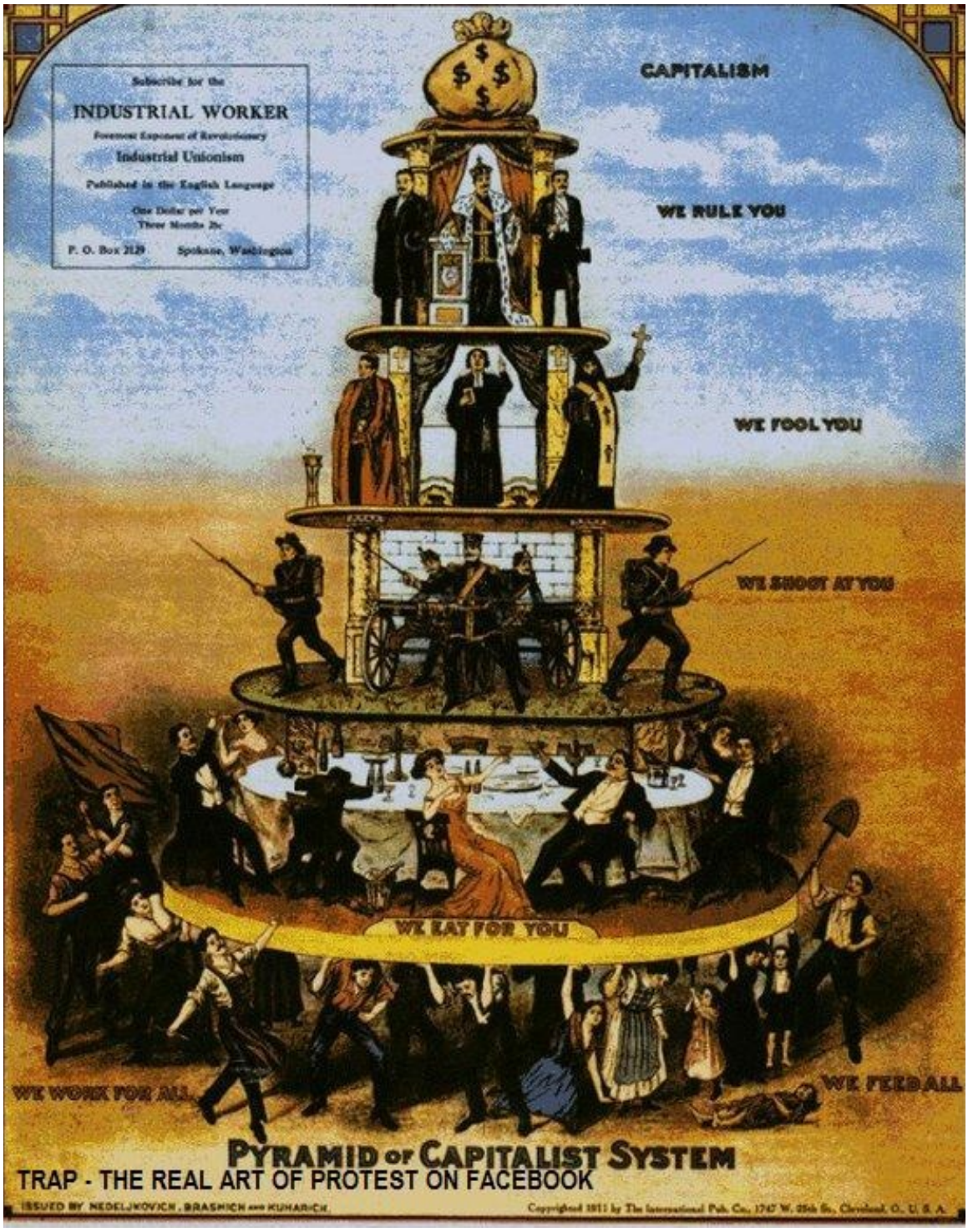
In conclusion, although we have indicated a possible alternative form of democracy to address the current needs and African conditions, we cannot posit in advance the social agency and its organisational form. Only the democratization struggle of the people will be able both to pose these questions more concretely and sharply as well as indicate possible resolution. Meanwhile, we can say with certain amount of confidence that the liberal model constructed on the neo-liberal economy has entered into crisis both in imperialist centers as well as in the periphery. The Tahrir square in Egypt and 'occupy wall street' movement in the financial cities of imperial centres from Washington, New York to London is symptomatic of this crisis. These movements have exposed the democratic fraud of the liberal model and placed on the historical agenda a search and struggle for alternative forms of political and economic organisation of human society.

In Africa, the new wave of the exploitation of natural resources on the one hand, and militarization of the continent under the aegis of AFRICOM, on the other, poses new

challenges to the democratic struggles of the working people. After NATO's invasion of Libya, military occupation of the continent is no longer hypothetical. The question before us is: Are we going to gullibly repeat the models imposed on us by the West and its concomitant double standards, or think creatively of alternative forms of political and economic organisation of our societies?

To sum up my discussion on liberal democracy as an imposed model and democratisation as the struggle of the working people for greater freedom and human dignity against the voracious capitalist-imperialist system, I can do no better then reproduce these protest images from Tahrir square and 'Occupy Wall Street' movement.[*]

[*] I am grateful to Natasha Shivji for finding these images for me from the Facebook.



TRAP - THE REAL ART OF PROTEST ON FACEBOOK


ONE LOVE
YOUR VOTE HERE


EGYPT Supports
Wisconsin
Workers
One World
One Pain
TRAP ET CPU

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

NEW YORK 1929



CRISIS AND PROTEST

ITALY 1929



RISE OF FASCISM

NEW YORK 2011



CRISIS AND PROTEST

LIBYA 2011



RISE OF NATO

DID YOU GET IT NOW?

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