Book Reviews

Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly (2015), *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change*, London: Zed Books, ISBN: 1780329970, 263 pp.

Protest movements have gained extraordinary attention in African Studies over the past several years, most recently evidenced by the 2015 European Conference on African Studies ("Collective Mobilisations in Africa"). At the same time, Africanists' analytical tools for grasping protest seem largely outdated: much of today's writing on social movements, for instance, either borrows from the civil society debate of the 1990s, or remains shot through with references to Jean-François Bayart – the very theorist who always belittled resistance and contestation. In this context, *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change* is a highly welcome contribution to the field, opening up new and refreshing perspectives on the study of contentious politics.

The authors, Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly, are concerned with large-scale, mainly anti-government protests on the African continent and have a clear analytical quest: to develop a historically contextualised understanding of "what is specific to African protest" (7). Central to this understanding is the urban underclass – Branch and Mampilly, in reference to Partha Chatterjee, call it "political society": the anonymous masses of poor urban dwellers who generally induce both massive and militant participation within political movements, but who have curiously remained the "blind spot at the centre of descriptions of urban popular protest" (19). Particular attention is paid to political society's strained relationship with civil society, a division originating in the colonial separation of urban populations "into a small, relatively privileged, elite and working class on one side, opposed to a large underclass subject to constant coercion on the other" (8). According to the authors, this division has formed different identities and ultimately distinct forms of politics and protest – and continues to do so today. Civil society, the current heir of the privileged urban category of colonial times, can generally hope for the gradual improvement of its social, political, and economic position. Moreover, since it has privileges to lose, it enters protests with a moderate interest in reform. For political society, by contrast, "everything must change for anything to change" (33); it enters popular protest with the aim of overturning the entire system as quickly and radically as possible.

The key dilemma here is that "the political inclusion of [civil society] may come about at the cost of excluding the majority" – political society (65).

The debate over the nature and the beneficiaries of popular protest and political change in postcolonial Africa is insightfully introduced by drawing on two of its key intellectual forefathers, Kwame Nkrumah and Frantz Fanon, and by outlining political society's role in the anti-colonial struggle (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 addresses the resistance by political society to structural adjustment programmes and austerity measures, which contributed significantly to the regime changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The contemporary protest wave is addressed in Chapter 4 – Branch and Mampilly list 105 protests in 40 countries "that involved significant political society participation" between 2005 and 2014 (68–69). These protests are situated in a context of neo-liberalism, "where Africa's much-heralded growth has […] predominately been jobless," benefitting elites and civil society with access to international networks while leaving the poor (particularly the youth) with "contracting opportunities" (71). Economic grievances, translated into the ubiquitous language of liberal democracy, become "anti-corruption and anti-incumbency" demands (83), which in some instances created a protest platform for civil society, opposition parties, and political society to unite. Four case studies (Nigeria, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Sudan) illustrate how fragile and complicated this coalition is (Chapters 5–8). Nigeria's "Occupy" movement in 2012, for instance, a broad coalition of labour unions, artists, public intellectuals, and the urban poor, disintegrated when organised labour entered negotiations with the president at the time, Goodluck Jonathan (106). In Uganda's 2011 "Walk-to-Work" protests, civil society refrained from mobilising the urban poor and left the task to opposition politicians, whom it then condemned as self-interested and players within the corrupt political game (142). In Ethiopia's 2005 upheavals, students and political society protests converged in a mass movement against the regime of Meles Zenawi and then faced a brutal crackdown that left "at least two hundred killed [and] tens of thousands in prison" (166). In Sudan, finally, student activists in 2013 failed to connect with either the opposition parties or the "*shammasha*, the unemployed youth who had played a central role in the prior two successful Sudanese revolts" (193). Across these cases, Branch and Mampilly persuasively apply the same framework: they trace the historical relationships between the state, civil society, and political society to then analyse how protests emerge from and transform these relationships.

The conclusion rightfully suggests that "the African experience of protest can help illuminate today's worldwide protest upsurge in novel ways" (201). Whether it is the "crisis of representation" that political

society protest generally arises from (207), the leaderless and heterogeneous crowds whose ideological motivations can rarely be pinpointed, or the interplay of radicalisation and (internationally funded) state militarisation (215), Branch and Mampilly provide much food for thought for anyone interested in linking African Studies with the larger debate on protests today.

In sum, *Africa Uprising* provides Africanists with a tangible theoretical framework to conceptualise and situate urban resistance – a timely and significant achievement. Whether political society is a productive analytical lens, however, remains to be seen. Methodologically, it is still unclear how to operationalise political society, how to capture such a heterogeneous, ambivalent, and situational amalgamation of people. Put differently, what would an ideal ethnography of political society look like? And would it confirm the category's excluded and oppositional position, or demonstrate political society's more ambiguous oscillation between political exclusion and inclusion? Whatever the responses may be, *Africa Uprising* provides myriad questions and answers that are likely to spark substantial new research. Readers will find an accessibly written and well-researched book that elegantly combines specific case studies with general theory-building.

▪ Joschka Philipps