

Social Criticism and Contestation: Reflections on the Politics of Anger and Outrage

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Introduction

This paper discusses the sociological relevance of feelings of anger and outrage. Relevance in this context means the extent to which these notions can be usefully applied to gaining insights into the constitution of society. To start with, both emotions are key properties of social relations. They point to a condition displayed by individuals when, for whatever reason, they are strongly unhappy about a given state of affairs. This condition is especially directed against oneself or others. While anger entails a feeling of having been wronged or offended and calls, consequently, for some form of redress, outrage is simply its intensified form coupled with the idea that normative expectations have been violated. Therefore, to the extent that these emotions occur in the context of social relations, it can be argued that they are relevant to the constitution of society. The feelings of wrong-doing and violation of normative expectations assume the existence of a common framework. This framework binds the actions of different individuals into a moral frame that enables them to interpret whatever occurs in interaction approvingly or disapprovingly.

The existence of this moral frame is of crucial importance to this paper. In fact, the purpose is to discuss the extent to which anger and outrage can be usefully integrated into the study of protest in general, and in Africa, in particular. Traditionally, protests have been studied within the theoretical and conceptual framework laid down by the notion of social movements. Social movements are generally understood as manifestations of dissent that translate into collective claims making through relevant repertoires of collective action (Tilly 1986; Joyce 2002). To the extent that protest is a form of dissent and collective claims making it is only logical that its study should be pursued within this conceptual framework. The starting point for the discussion proposed here is the claim that dissent and claims making

are made intelligible within moral frames. In this sense, moral frames are central to the conditions of possibility of protest.

I argue that the concept of social movements implies a research programme that draws heavily from European political experience. It may, therefore, prove inadequate to a study of contestation in African settings. After an initial discussion of the shortcomings of this research programme, I will argue that protest must be conceptualised as social action of a special kind, namely the kind that makes politics possible. I suggest that politics is basically a moral debate which, in turn, presupposes citizenship as a condition for participation. The argument will be elaborated with reference to Michael Walzer's insights into the structure and rationale of social criticism while at the same time drawing from the work of Mahmood Mamdani, especially his distinction between citizen and subject in the context of colonial rule.

The idea that moral frames have a binding effect on individuals draws attention to a basic sociological fact: the intelligibility of anger and outrage lies in the extent to which these emotions are socially constructed. This is not to argue that anger and outrage do not exist beyond the vocabulary and normative sanctions which a community uses to make sense of a given set of emotions. Rather, the point is simply that the way in which these emotions are expressed, the reasons which give individuals a legitimate sense of these feelings and the circumstances under which they constitute coherent reactions to the actions of others provide the background against which members of a community know what to do with them and about them. In other words, understanding these circumstances are expressed can be an important asset in the attempt to make sense of the sociological coherence of local contexts and the phenomena taking place within them. It can be argued that anger and outrage are critical commentaries on what holds a political community together, or, for that matter, what does it apart. This is the sociological background to my central argument. I argue that since anger and outrage are particular manifestations of contestation, contestation can be usefully looked at as a form of social criticism which finds practical expression in protest action. To put it differently, I argue that the study of protest amounts, from a sociological point of view, to the study of how individuals relate to and perceive social order. Studying the nature of contestation from the perspective of its articulation with social criticism

appears fundamental to a proper grasp of what is entailed in protest within an African context.

I will discuss these issues in two steps. In the first step I position my claim within the larger field of social movements. After a brief description of the research programme on social movements I will raise doubts concerning the usefulness of this notion to the study of protest in the African context. In this paper 'social movements' will be described with reference to Imre Lakatos's idea of a 'research programme', i.e. a dynamic set of theories seeking to make sense of a given class of phenomena (Lakatos 1978). To be sure, the concern is not with the actual objects described by the notion of social movements, but rather the set of assumptions underlying the possibility of description. The main thrust of this research programme bears too many resemblances to the history of Europe. In this sense, a wholesale adoption of its assumptions would appear to distort, rather than actually represent African political reality. This discussion will pave the way for the second step, which will consist in developing the central claim. I will draw specifically on a discussion of Michael Walzer's (1989b; 1993) ideas concerning morality to argue that they offer points of anchorage for the grounding of the study of protest in society and its constitutive processes. I will offer a preliminary typology of protest to serve as a heuristic device with which description of protest can be undertaken. I will then close with a brief discussion of instances of protest in Angola and Mozambique in order to bring into relief the extent to which Walzer's ideas can yield useful insights into the study of political culture in Africa.

The social movements 'research programme'

There is something upbeat about the notion of social movements. For one thing, it suggests dynamism of a sort that is steeped in the achievement of a desirable goal. The notion carries positive connotations when it is used in the social sciences. Indeed, it describes the collective challenges thrown against a central authority on behalf of interest groups without much formal political clout (Tilly 1978; McAdam; Tarrow; Tilly 2001). The positive elements in the notion shine through in the belief that a social movement can only earn this status if it fulfils three conditions, namely (1) solidarity among its members, (2) commitment to standing up for a cause against a common enemy and (3) deployment of means of contestation that go beyond the acceptable limits within a given polity (Melucci 1989). Studying

social movements, therefore, is nearly akin to taking the right side and setting about describing the right (or wrong) course taken (or to be taken) by history. This admittedly polemical rendering of the epistemological interest of research on social movements is justified, as will be seen further ahead, by the need to bring to light the shortcomings of the notion when it is called upon to account for contestation in the African context.

The three types of social movements identified by Raschke (1985) according to the rationale of their action celebrate the positive elements. In the past, back in the 17th Century, social movements were uprisings against the insidious encroachment of the State through the levying of taxes. In standing up against this encroachment into local autonomy protesters were rightfully resisting the will to power of corrupt and authoritarian aristocratic regimes by laying claims to a fairer distribution of power. Later on, with the advent of capitalism in the 19th Century, social movements formed around industrial action and laid claims on a just distribution of national resources. In more recent years, especially in the wake of the post-war welfare arrangements in Western Europe, social movements – in particular, the student revolts of the late sixties – have been about forcing polities to own up to their emancipatory agenda. They have done this by campaigning for the recognition of the rights of those condemned by bigotry to leading marginal lives - women, gays and racial minorities – in societies describing themselves as liberal (for a good overview see Staggenborg 2008). It is difficult to consider these three types without gaining a positivist sense not only of the righteousness of the underlying protests, but also of the inevitability of the changes which they are expected to achieve.

As indicated above, I borrow Imre Lakatos' notion of a research programme (1978) to briefly characterise the study of social movements for the immediate purposes of the present contribution. Bearing in mind that Lakatos defined a research programme as a set of closely related theories spread over time and based on a common idea, we could agree to describe the study of social movements as related theoretical propositions concerning legitimate and necessary social change undertaken by social groups with legitimate grievances against the dominant political order. The assumption of a necessary social change driven by legitimate grievances constitutes the hard core of the research programme. The identification of phases and types in the historical evolution and geographical spread of

social movements would correspond to what Lakatos thought a positive heuristic should be able to deliver. It gives instructions to the researcher on the kinds of phenomena to look at in order to maintain a fruitful balance between theoretical propositions and empirical reality.

While research on social movements has made important contributions to our understanding of history, particularly social and political history (Tilly 1978), traditions of resistance around the world (e.g. Abbink; de Bruijn; Walraven, van 2003 and Ahikire; Mamdani; Oloka-Onyango 1994 for Africa; Wickham-Crowley 1992 for Latin America), it can still be argued that its usefulness can be questioned, particularly as far as Africa is concerned. To be sure, the notion has not been absent from attempts at describing social processes in Africa. In fact, it has been variously used to describe peasant actions and ethnically motivated uprisings and millenarianism. In more recent years, the notion has been deployed as a catch-all phrase to account for civil society groups mobilizing against what they perceive to be the onslaught of neo-liberal thinking on African countries as represented by structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund¹. The sense of the appropriateness of the notion of social movement when it is applied to phenomena observed in Africa feeds on the plausible assumption that groups described as social movements are standing up collectively against a common enemy with a view to heralding a better social order.

The shortcomings of the notion in the context of African studies can be reduced to three main problems. The first problem is epistemological and has to do with the nature of the knowledge that one can generate within the social movement research programme. The suggestion made further above to the effect that there is something upbeat about how the social movement notion is deployed in research calls attention to the danger of teleology. Social movements point to the articulation of collective grievances against a common enemy and against the background of knowledge of what a just and better society is. Under these circumstances, any piece of research that sees a warrant for the description of any instance of contestation as a manifestation of the presence of a social movement runs two types of risk. First, it runs the risk of confusing its own theoretical assumptions with empirical reality. Second, it runs the risk of forcing empirical reality into the

¹ The label currently in use to describe this phenomenon is “new social movements” (see Tarrow 2005; Pichardo 1997; Boron and Lechini 2005).

straightjacket of its own theoretical strictures. Generally speaking, the normative nature of the definition of social movements gives researchers considerable leeway with regard to what should count as a social movement and what should not. Any form of contestation that falls under the analytical gaze of the researcher of social movements becomes, by virtue of the researcher's attention and conceptual framework, a social movement.

The second problem is what Mahmood Mamdani (1996), in another context, described as 'history by analogy'. This refers to the tendency to look at African historical phenomena with reference to European historical development. To put it differently, history by analogy takes place when concepts and theoretical implications derived from a very specific context are used to describe a completely different context without due attention being paid to local specificities on both sides. History by analogy is the uncritical use of concepts in the social sciences. Given that the history of social movements has been extensively (and comprehensively) studied in Europe, all that remains to be done is to document instances of the phenomenon elsewhere. This procedure does not in itself constitute enough reason to frown upon history by analogy. Cause for concern emerges the moment when research is transformed into the study of what Africa lacks in order to fit into the ideal-type represented by Europe. In the study of social movements this can happen at many crucial analytical junctures. For instance, since research on social movements in Europe has shown that these reveal internal solidarity, commitment against a common enemy and deployment of non-conventional means of protest absence of any or all of these features from anything that convention has agreed to assign the label of a social movement in Africa might lead to a search for the reasons why Africa fails to live up to the model.

Again, although such a search may form a legitimate part of any inquiry into a social phenomenon when it is undertaken under the general assumption that there is an ideal form which phenomena of the same type take, it can hinder, rather than further, understanding. Equally problematic can be the assumption of a historical narrative which describes the early and later forms of social movements against the yardstick of European historical development. So-called 'bread riots' motivated by sheer want in contexts within which individuals and communities lacked political clout to make themselves heard may indeed describe an early phase of social movements in European history. Their recurrence today in societies under the grip of

economic deprivation and political authoritarianism should not necessarily mean that the institutional and cultural context obtaining at the time of such uprisings in Europe is all that one needs to ascertain in order to be able to account for similar events today in Africa. The Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has drawn attention to the pitfalls entailed in such positions with their indictment of what they call the sociology of presences and absences (Santos 2002).

Finally, and perhaps the most serious problem, the social movement research programme seems to have difficulties in articulating the genesis of the phenomenon with the general challenge of providing sociological descriptions of social phenomena that draw directly from the way society actually manifests itself. This problem is not new. It dogged the early attempts at defining the notion of social movements in empirically useful ways (see for example Smelser 1962 and Castells 1978). To put it bluntly, the problem with the idea of social movement is its underdetermination. It is not clear under what circumstances a certain type of events – say, various forms of protest – warrant a description in terms of the social movement research programme. There is a historicist assumption in the hard core of the research programme. It comes into view in the implicit belief in the desirable inevitability of the change likely to be wrought by a social movement. In this connection, the research programme raises issues concerning the selected reference class. When peasants, for instance, organize to protest against the marketing board of a given country what is the particular aspect of their action that allows a researcher to claim that he or she is dealing with a social movement? When youths take to the street to protest against unemployment or food price increases what is the particular aspect of their desperate action that warrants the social movement description? It should become clear from these doubts that the underdetermination to which empirical material on social movements lends itself results from the difficulties evidenced by the concept to establish a convincing link between the reality of social life and the explanatory claims of the concept itself.

The three problems discussed above, namely the epistemological, the analytical and the empirical, cannot be swept under the carpet if one is serious about understanding contestation and its place and role in African social life. As a matter of fact, the problems call for a bracketing off of the notion of social movements while an account of the nature of contestation is

attempted that seeks to engage with social life and reality. The American philosopher Michael Walzer seems to offer a useful point of entry into this particular challenge. In his work he is, of course, not directly interested in protest as such. However, his ideas on the nature of morality and the place and role of social criticism can be woven into an argument that can serve the purpose of linking social movements to empirical social reality. Indeed, there is a sense in which Michael Walzer's argument could be read as an elaboration on Edward P. Thompson's (1971) notion of the 'moral economy' and his analysis of the manner in which the poor sought legitimacy to their demands for a fair price on moral grounds. The idea of social criticism as developed by Michael Walzer can help us to articulate the feelings entailed in protest – outrage and anger – with the moral frameworks necessary to their political intelligibility.

Social criticism and morality²

In his work reflecting on what makes it possible for individuals within and across communities to be moved by the fate of others Walzer (2006) argues that a sense of good and evil plays a significant role. This, however, does not commit him to a single view of morality. In fact, he distinguishes two basic forms which morality can take, each one of which describes the context within which, and the terms under which, it becomes relevant to individuals' ability to be moved by the fate of others. More specifically, Walzer is interested in the role played in debate when it comes to answering the question as to the kinds of obligations we have to others. The first form, which he calls thin morality, has no specific individual in mind when it is called upon to help answer the question concerning the obligations we have towards others. Thin morality refers to a universal obligation to recognise the humanity of those who may be too far away from us. It is this sense of universal obligation that enables each one of us to feel solidarity with those fighting for their freedom and justice without committing us to accepting the exact details of which give substance to their sense of those values.

² There is an earlier literature on social movements that comments on the role of morality (Gusfeld 1986; Zurcher Jr.; Kirkpatrick. 1976). It uses the concept of "moral crusade" partly drawing from Howard S. Becker's notion of "moral enterprise" (1963) to focus attention on individuals who campaign on issues involving morality. As it will be shown in this section, this is not the sense in which the notion of morality as related to contestation will be used in this paper. Rather, the concern is with an articulation of the notion with debate in the public sphere.

Thick morality, in contrast, refers to the obligations individuals have towards others who share local conditions and circumstances placing them into the same community of fate and values. A simple sense of what makes individuals human is not enough to account for the obligations they must have towards others. A common historical experience, which can find expression in a common language and a common set of cultural values, binds each and every individual to a rich web of meanings which are more likely to be immediately intelligible within a specific local setting. Thick morality is local, whereas thin morality is global. Individuals draw from their sense of thick morality to understand and feel sympathy towards the moral claims made by others in far-away places. What enables them to develop this sense of obligation is not an understanding of the exact details of the meaning which others attach to the values which they pursue. Rather, it is the general recognition of the right held by every individual to be respected in their dignity as humans³.

Walzer's argument may sound relativist. In insisting on two types of moral language that are intelligible within specific contexts it does sound as though Walzer is arguing for the incommensurability of values across cultures. In actual fact, the argument is more nuanced than this. At one level his point is that it is wrong to assume that morality can be approached with a recipe-book attitude spelling out what is to count as an appropriate set of values to be deployed in every situation where individuals are called upon to address their moral obligation to others. Walzer is making a plea for a discursive perspective on morality that assumes that what comes to count as the morally right way to behave towards others is the outcome of debate within a normative community. At another level, the philosopher is also arguing that the recognition of distinct forms of moral language does not imply that all that is left for individuals who are far away from others is simply to accept the legitimacy of others' local values. In a sense, Walzer is in line with those who argue along the lines of cosmopolitanism and claim that in acknowledging difference individuals are under no obligation to accept values which offend their moral sense (see Appiah 2006).

Thick and Thin was Walzer's response to the critics of his earlier *Spheres of Justice* (1989a). In this book, he suggested that pluralism had produced a

³ I understand the right to be respected in one's dignity in the sense developed by Ronald Dworkin (1996) in his elaboration on the meaning of equality as the right to be treated with equal concern.

complex notion and practice of equality. This introduced into the definition of a just society the caveat that it is one which recognises complex equality. In such a society advantages associated with identity, for instance intelligence, do not translate into advantages in other dimensions, for instance political clout or personal wealth. The idea of the existence of a thin and thick moral language represented an attempt to set out the terms under which moral debate takes place against the background of complex equality. Thick morality takes stock of complexity and, for this reason, it provides the ideal background for fruitful moral debate. This is precisely where Walzer's reflection on the role of social criticism becomes relevant.

In several works Walzer (1989b, 1993) discusses and develops ideas concerning social criticism. He lays emphasis particularly on what he considers to be the interpretative path⁴ to criticism. The main claim is that morality is something over which members of a society argue (Walzer 1993 p. 42). Moral argument addresses the question concerning what the right thing to do may be. In order to answer this question individuals have to consider the society in which they live, the means individuals have at hand, the opportunities open to them and many other structural aspects that constrain or enable action. According to Walzer, the answer has to do with the meaning which the way of life of a given community has to individuals. At the end of the deliberations individuals have to be able to say what the right thing to do is as far as they are concerned (p. 33). Social criticism, therefore, represents the different positions which individuals articulate and express in moral debate. Such positions reflect different understandings and interpretations of social order and the place which different individuals should have in it.

My point is that social criticism offers an adequate point of entry into the politics of contestation. Unlike the notion of social movement, which packages contestation into a normative frame of reference that lends normative and teleological legitimacy to protest, social criticism does not pass judgement on the societal relevance of contestation. It simply bears witness to how individuals position themselves with regard to social order while at the same time intimating the possibility that such positioning may harbour different interpretations of how a society should be organized and what life chances it should be able to make available to its members.

⁴ He distinguishes three paths to morality: discovery, invention and interpretation (Walzer 1993).

Contestation is in this sense a critical commentary on the nature of society given by its members. Protest, which is the practical form taken by contestation, deserves to be studied at its place of origin in society. Social criticism is where protest originates as contestation. Societal members offer critical commentaries from different stations, different perspectives and different existential experiences. A useful way to address the challenge of making sense of protest in Africa, therefore, is to spell out the conditions under which social criticism takes place, for it is in those conditions that the types are to be found which offer heuristic models for the study of protest⁵.

Social criticism and protest

That the idea of contestation as social criticism is not far-fetched as it may sound can be quickly ascertained with two brief examples: the Great Xhosa Cattle Killing Movement and the Mau-Mau Rebellion in Kenya. The former belongs to the category of phenomena that go under the name of millenarian movements, themselves a sub-category of social movements. The latter belongs to the category of ethnic revival movements⁶, yet another sub-category of social movements. The social movement research programme would describe and analyse these phenomena against the background of resistance to colonial rule, state encroachment and the use of unconventional ways of protesting. A closer look at the events making up both phenomena reveals however that their basic constitutive moment is not the relationship to the outside world or external factors, in both cases British colonial rule. It is rather the thick morality of the respective groups which is at the centre of acrimonious – and, in the case of the Mau-Mau – violent debate.

According to the brilliant account of the Great Xhosa Cattle Killing Movement written by Jeffrey B. Peires (1989; see also Stapleton 1991) what

⁵ The study of social movements has sought to accomplish this task in various ways. One good example is given by the volume edited by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001). My claim is that the research programme implied by the idea of social movement attaches more importance to the macro level. Most contestation in Africa takes place at the micro level for which adequate conceptual and analytical approaches are lacking.

⁶ This is a shorthand description that takes into account John Lonsdale's (1990) plausible claim according to which the Mau-Mau rebellion was mainly directed at fellow Kikuyu, thus, entailing in a sense an awakening of ethnic loyalties and commitment.

was at stake when little prophetess Nongqawuse⁷ announced the rebirth of the ancestors was not only opposition to the encroaching British or unease regarding the animal diseases decimating Xhosa cattle. It was also, and perhaps more importantly, the community's sense of itself, the obligations attendant upon community membership and what was necessary for Xhosa social order to be true to itself. It is little wonder that much of what went on during those tragic months was a long-drawn inner Xhosa debate around these issues⁸. The British appeared merely as a peripheral factor, even if a significant one owing to their military might. Much the same can be said about the Mau-Mau movement in colonial Kenya, as forcefully pointed out by Dieter Neubert (1999). He draws heavily on John Lonsdale (1990) who has written a brilliant account of this event (see also Anderson 2005 and Odhiambo; Stephen; Lonsdale 2003). The central issue here again is less the unequal distribution of power among the different racial groups making up Kenyan society and more the obligations which Kikuyu political representatives within the British colonial administration had towards their people. The Mau-Mau uprising exacted a heavy death toll on the white settler population of colonial Kenya. Equally taxing was the death toll within the Kikuyu community perpetrated by members of the Kikuyu community against other Kikuyu.

The basic sociological impulse underlying contestation is, therefore, social criticism. It constitutes itself on the back of moral argument, i.e. debate about the obligations members of a community feel towards other members of the same community. The conditions under which moral argument takes place are important in any attempt at drawing analytical consequences which can inform a study of protest in African settings. These conditions do not owe their importance to the fact that they have to be met. Rather, their importance results from the fact that negotiating over whether they should exist, and how, is part of the moral argument. This applies, by extension, to the rules governing the behaviour of participants in a moral argument. These rules have to do with how dissent, difference of opinion, support and agreement are expressed. Again, the point is not that such rules should be

⁷ Nongqawuse was a young Xhosa girl who reported encounters with ancestors demanding that the Xhosa kill their cattle, clean their granaries and stop tilling the land to await the rebirth of the ancestors who would come to free the people from European rule.

⁸ Peires analyses these issues brilliantly in an article published in 1987 focusing mainly on 'the Xhosa-language vocabulary used by the believers' (Peires 1987: 44).

laid down before moral argument can take place. The point is, rather, that the way in which such rules emerge and are agreed upon is part and parcel of the moral argument. Jean-Godefroy Bidima's (1997) insightful discussion of the African practice of 'Palaver' and how its progressive disappearance has impoverished the African public sphere brings to the fore the constitutive role played by argument over how to argue in moral debate.

A moral debate produces contestation that can express itself as protest within a political context. I draw on Mahmood Mamdani's distinction between *Citizen and Subject* (1996) to argue that protest is politically significant in the context of citizenship. According to Mamdani the condition of citizenship is one in which individuals relate to the state through rights. The status of individuals as citizens takes effect the moment the state takes upon itself the obligation to guarantee the conditions under which what is implied in the rights can be fulfilled. A subject, by contrast, does not relate to the state via his or her rights. A subject is defined by custom, the preservation of which is seen as an obligation by the state. Mamdani used this insightful argument to describe and analyse the extent to which the colonial state was bent on denying politics to Africans. I expand Mamdani's argument in this article to argue that, generally speaking, African states have failed to translate independence – which was fought in the name of citizenship – into the constitution of political spaces within which individual Africans could re-invent themselves as citizens through their participation in the moral debate constitutive of their societies. The rather normative programme implied in the notion of social movement assumes the existence of this political space and construes any act of contestation automatically as (political) protest. As we shall see in the brief discussion of the cases of Angola and Mozambique further below, contestation under conditions of subjecthood does not lend itself to an analytically and theoretically useful study of protest action.

Anger and outrage, the two feelings that opened this essay, are expressions of opposition to certain standpoints. They are reactions to differences of opinion concerning the interpretation of the nature of social order and that which should maintain it. How legitimate such reactions are depends, of course, on the terms under which debate takes place. What anger and outrage entitles participants in a debate to undertake is also an issue that relates to the culture of debate within which moral debate takes place. These emotions are expressions of protest, but not the kind of protest which would

enable researchers to draw conclusions concerning the extent to which they stand before a social movement. Anger and outrage are expressions of protest to the extent that they draw attention to the existence of a moral community within which these emotions are potentially intelligible and of which those expressing them are members. Here again, no assumption is made regarding how such a moral community is structured or even how it should be structured in order for the articulation of protest to take place.

A typology of protest can be designed to serve as a heuristic device to make the sociological context within which protest comes to be expressed available to description and analysis. It is intended as a device to help researchers account for contestation in African settings while avoiding the pitfalls of the normatively laden social movement research programme. The typology draws from elements suggesting the conditions of possibility of moral argument. Its structure rests on the attributes that can be readily associated with contestation. Contestation is the (the self declared or guaranteed) right to differ. It can be violent or peaceful, organised or spontaneous; it can have a clear target or one that is diffuse; it articulates demands or simply rejects an imposition; finally, it articulates the will to change the framework of debate or maintain it.

These attributes can be summed up with the help of five basic dimensions: (a) forms of articulation, (b) structure of articulation, (c) content, (d) target and (e) direction. Each dimension has two values which stand in a dialectical relationship to one another. In other words, forms of articulation can be violent (eg. looting, clashes with police, road obstructions) or peaceful (eg. marches), the structure of articulation can be organized (trade unions, interest groups) or spontaneous (eg. youth, market vendors, dwellers), the content can articulate demands (eg. new measures and policies) or reject impositions (eg. measures and policies), the target can be clear (eg. official in charge, government agency, party) or unclear (eg. general dissatisfaction) and the direction can point towards change (eg. resignation of officials, government, new elections) or preservation of the status quo (eg. corrections in favour group interest).

The cross-tabulation of dimensions and values yields a collection of properties based on empirical indicators that can be developed and some of which are presented above. The values are points of concentration of several variables that offer an empirical background for descriptive inference to be carried out. The collections of properties allow for the construction of ideal-

types of protests which yield a heuristic typology based on the definition of contestation as social criticism. Three basic types emerge out of the cross-tabulation. Protest that is violent, organized, based on the formulation of demands with a clear addressee and aiming at change constitutes one type; let us call it “the upheaval type”. Protest which is peaceful, organized, formulates demands with a clear addressee and aiming at preserving the basic structures of the social order constitutes a second type that can be called “the reform type”. A third type results from the combination of violent, spontaneous acts articulating demands or rejecting policy with unclear addressees and silent on the long-term ends of the actions. It can be called “the anomic type”.

The types hinge on two dimensions, namely (a) form and (b) structure of articulation. Both the form and the structure of contestation inhere into content, target and direction to the extent that they set the conditions under which interaction can be further pursued. Whether one is making demands or rejecting them, addressing a clear or unclear interlocutor or even aiming at change or maintaining the status quo, the expressive potential of these dimensions is influenced by whether violence plays any role at all and, furthermore, whether individuals come together to organize around issues. Moreover, the emphasis on these two dimensions draws attention to a fundamental aspect of contestation as political instrument. It serves to give substance to politics.

The ideal-type of protest that comes closest to describing the normative ideal of democratic politics is the reform type. Democratic politics, like a good conversation, is based on the progressive conquering of issues by way of their clarification. This, in turn, makes new aspects visible and can also render them manageable. In the process, those engaged in the conversation get to know their own position better, identify new ways of pressing their points and canvassing their positions. The suggestion that democratic politics is mostly about reform does not mean that absence of reform implies the presence of undemocratic politics. It means simply that democratic politics is steeped in the relentless interpretation of the moral basis of society. Interpretation always takes its cue from the coherence of interests and the sense of moral obligation which individuals feel towards other individuals.

In this sense, the idea of reform should not be taken in its radical conception of a fundamental and radical break. Rather, it should be understood as the

adjustment of aspects of social order to fit the levels of understanding which conflicting interpretations have reached. Democratic politics is dynamic. Reform inheres into its functioning logic. Without reform democratic politics becomes sclerotic. The critical signs of such a sclerosis are to be seen in the other two idea-types, namely the “upheaval type” and the “anomic type”. The former is similar to a loud argument where parties to a discussion adopt radical positions, do not listen to other arguments and are attracted by the use of force as a legitimate way of asserting themselves. This type does not imply the end of democratic politics. Rather, it indicates a development which sets democratic politics into a critical path that reveals strains in the ability of political actors to reconcile their interests. When the strain degenerates into failure “upheaval” can be the outcome, often leading up to civil war, coup d’état or a protracted crisis. The latter ideal-type, i.e. the “anomic type” is similar to a conversation in which one of the interlocutors simply loses interest and withdraws into an introspective mood marked by apparent indifference. The “anomic type” is not the end of democratic politics either. However, it does signal a failure by political actors to commit themselves to values which can underlie politics. The likely downward spiral here is the emergence of authoritarianism. From the point of view of the design of typologies (see Kluge 2000) civil war or authoritarianism are prototypes that need not concern us. They represent extreme cases that at the end of the day may obtain when political actors fail to keep their political engagement within the bounds of the “reform type”. Since the point of the typology suggested here is to provide a point of entry into the sociological description of protest and the politics of contestation the focus must be placed upon what makes discussion possible and what keeps it going.

We can bear this framework in mind in discussing the particular cases of Mozambique and Angola. The aim will not be to classify forms of protest and contestation that took place in these countries. Rather, we will aim at drawing attention to critical issues that result from looking at such phenomena from the point of view of moral debate and against the background of the typology suggested briefly here.

Anger and outrage in Mozambique and Angola

On 5 February 2009, Maputo, Mozambique’s capital city, witnessed never seen riots. Youngsters protesting against increases in the fare prices of the

so-called 'chapas'⁹ poured into the streets, erected road-blocks, set cars on fire and looted shops. The police stepped in using live ammunition and killed some of the demonstrators. The city was paralysed for two days with city dwellers afraid of venturing out of their houses to go to work. The riots, which were celebrated in the Mozambican media as the rebellion of the masses against an arrogant government, took place against the background of a political system that, in theory at least, called itself democratic. The government of the day had only a few months earlier been confirmed in power with an overwhelming share of the vote that delivered an absolute majority in parliament. A little over a year later, on 1 September 2010, Maputo was again shaken by similar riots that started in the shantytowns and gradually spread into the city like bushfire and left a trail of destruction and claimed many lives. Here again the reaction was to celebrate the protests as the uprising of those who had lost hope and had no other way of making themselves heard within the political system.

Angola has never known anything similar to Mozambique's 'chapa riots'. With the exception of the so-called '27th May Revolt'¹⁰, which took place within the limited confines of the ruling party and exacted a heavy human toll at the level of party cadres, the country has been spared such forms of protest. The current government, led by the MPLA¹¹ enjoys a comfortable absolute majority in the Angolan parliament. The democratic credentials of the Angolan political system are highly contested. The current President, José Eduardo dos Santos, has been in power for close to four decades. He is said to run his country in an authoritarian and highly corrupt manner.

⁹ 'Chapa' is the name given to the mini-buses used for public transportation in Mozambican cities.

¹⁰ This refers to a purported coup attempt which led to the execution of several internal dissidents within the MPLA in 1977. Their leader was Nito Alves, a top ranking party member, who accused the leadership of disowning the socialist objectives of the MPLA's struggle by adopting a Stalinist political stance. More on this: <http://27maio.com> (last consulted on 2 April 2011). More on these events can be read in Cabrita 2007 and Botelho 2007.

¹¹ MPLA stands for People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola. It has run Angola since independence in 1975. Prior to that it fought a war of liberation against the Portuguese colonial regime alongside UNITA (National Union for the Total Liberation of Angola led by the idiosyncratic and late Jonas Savimbi) and FNLA (National Front for the Liberation of Angola), but often in opposition to them. After independence the MPLA and UNITA fought a bitter and bloody civil war that was won by the former. At the last elections the MPLA secured an overwhelming majority in parliament.

Dissent is heavily repressed while at the same time he canvasses the support of opponents through pay-offs.

The political history of these two countries is similar in many ways. Both were Portuguese colonies and came to independence through armed struggle. After independence both countries committed themselves to building a socialist society based on 'scientific Marxism' modelled on East Germany and the Soviet Union. As a consequence thereof, they set up one-party states which were believed to be the logical outcome of the respective struggles for liberation. These struggles came to be interpreted retrospectively as struggles of the exploited masses against the colonial capitalist system for the purpose of ushering in People's Republics run by a so-called people's dictatorship. Both countries fought protracted civil wars against rebel movements. The question that should be addressed in this section relates to the meaning of contestation in the context of politics in these two countries. While the civil war in Angola has been generally seen within the framework of the cold war, i.e. with a strong emphasis on the anti-communist orientation of the rebel movement, the civil war in Mozambique tended to be regarded against the background of a popular uprising along the lines of a social movement. While this has never been explicitly stated, the emphasis on how the Mozambican rebels articulated the resentment of rural communities against the forced villagisation policies of the ruling Marxist government suggested interpretive criteria informed by the social movement research programme.

If one looks at the context of politics in these two countries in terms of the descriptive framework suggested here, one aspect comes immediately to light. At no point in their political history did they really manage to create the conditions for moral debate to take place. While they fought the wars of independence in the name of citizenship, their post-independence policies failed to define the citizenry in ways which would have given them a stake in moral argument. The commitment to building socialist societies meant in effect that the moral obligations of individuals were defined by those wielding political power. Angolans and Mozambicans remained subjects, not citizens, of a system of domination that took the burden of moral responsibility away from the individual and invested it on a vanguard party of cadres who were held to be in a position to interpret the will of the people.

In the period immediately after independence politics simply did not take place. This would explain why these two countries experienced extremely violent forms of civil war. Of course, regional politics and the cold war played a major role in fuelling these civil wars. Equally important, however, was the internal context for the pursuit of politics. Having said this, social criticism did take place within the limited confines of the ruling parties. In Angola, it led to the '27th May Revolt', which corresponds to an upheaval. Interlocutors in the internal moral debate within the MPLA structure sought to assert an interpretation of their moral obligations based on a social democratic interpretation of the political objectives of the ruling MPLA. This dissent was brutally crushed, effectively removing any possibility of dialogue and constructive discussion within the party. In Mozambique no similar events took place, but from time to time debates would flare up within the party hierarchy¹² offering different interpretations of the sense of obligation some individuals felt towards others within society. For the most part, however, Mozambicans, like Angolans, remained politically indifferent, thus articulating their competing moral views away from the anomic type, i.e. outside of political space.

The political order which was brought about by the end of the civil wars in both countries did not make any significant changes to the political context. In Mozambique, the end of the civil war was not informed by the need to extend citizenship rights – in the sense of giving Mozambicans a stake in the moral debate constitutive of the political context. Rather, it was an arrangement between the international community and the Mozambican political elites that promised to the latter the prebends of the international development regime (See Macamo and Neubert 2003). In other words, the end of the civil war held the promise of the appropriation of the rents from development aid to the party that succeeded in securing state power at the ballot box. Much the same logic prevails in the case of Angola, where the end of the civil war gave the MPLA control over the proceeds from oil and diamonds. Both arrangements stifled any possibility of internal normative debate, thereby making politics next to impossible.

In this sense, protests such as those that have occurred in Mozambique in reaction to food price increases or even in Angola in reaction to evictions

¹² In 1983, for example, some within the party began to call for a mild change of course in economic policy. This was brushed aside with argument that they were betraying the original objectives of the struggle.

can hardly qualify as political protests in the strict sense. These are contestations that take place on the fringes of politics. They do not seem to hold the potential which a social movement research programme would ascribe to them. At a deeper analytical level what the Mozambican and Angolan cases show is that the analysis of protest needs to be founded on a clear definition of politics to be theoretically fruitful. In Mozambique, where the political system is less constrained than in Angola, and opposition parties appear to have more public expression, the protests largely took opposition parties by surprise. In their wake, opposition parties were unable to profit from the contestation, a fact which can be interpreted as a sign of the absence of politics in Mozambique.

Where politics is absent no moral argument takes place. Where no moral argument takes place, there can only be anger and outrage, which is hard to translate into politically significant protest. This difficulty cautions us against too hasty an articulation of protest and social movements in attempts at accounting for contestation in Africa. This is largely due to the normatively laden social movement research programme.

Contestation is the (the self declared or guaranteed) right to differ. It can be violent or peaceful, organised or spontaneous, it can have a clear target or one that is diffuse, it articulates demands or simply rejects an imposition and, finally, it articulates the will to change the framework of debate or maintain it. Contestation can take the form of a riot, an upheaval or efforts at reform. Riots and upheavals are the outlets which anger and outrage usually find in the absence of an overarching moral framework that would enable individuals to recognise legitimate grievances. Reform efforts point to the existence of an overarching moral framework which constitutes individuals as political actors.

To look at protest as social criticism means that attention should be placed on how political actors articulate their interests. This articulation takes place against the background of an interpretation of what it means to them to have obligations towards others. Democratic politics, in this sense, describes how political actors continually adjust their interpretations of social order to fit the understandings which they have achieved concerning what each interest group can be expected to deliver to others. Confrontation with other interpretations helps political actors define their positions and identify ways of asserting themselves that do not compromise other interests. Failure to keep moral argument within the dynamic bounds of reform can lead to the

attempts of different groups to win the upper-hand or simply to withdraw from the debate. In the former case, social criticism can degenerate into civil war and in the latter it can lead to authoritarianism.

In using the metaphor of a moral argument I am, therefore, drawing attention to the fact that politics is about articulating interests against the background of one's understanding of the extent to which the prevailing social order enables individuals to meet their obligations towards others without undue strain to them as individuals or groups. In this sense, identifying social criticism in protest is a heuristic device that should encourage the formulation of questions that open up possibilities for the sociological description of the context within which protest and contestation take place. This approach seems to be more suitable than the normative framework underlying the social movement research programme, for it neither takes the direction of protest for granted, nor does it assume that every form of protest is political.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to engage critically with the notion of social movements. To be sure, the notion has an enviable pedigree in research on protest. I have argued that while the notion offers valuable insights into how and why individuals organize to formulate demands, it does not appear analytically adequate to take account of contestation in Africa. One important reason that accounts for this shortcoming is the notion's apparent inability to relate to actual social processes that can be accounted for sociologically. Therefore, I am making two sorts of arguments. The first one is that the notion of social movements is too broad to capture local political processes as they occur in African political settings. There is contestation taking place and, sometimes, this contestation can be read as political protest. However, the decision on whether contestation is protest should not be derived from the assumptions made by the analytical framework provided for by the notion of social movements. The decision should be based on a sociological account of the conditions that make contestation available to description. These relate to how anger and outrage constitute themselves as such and what kinds of outlets they find in the wider society. The second sort of argument I am making amounts to a suggestion. The inability apparently evidenced by the notion of social movement to account for local political processes can be corrected if contestation is articulated

with social criticism. The idea here is that moral debate is constitutive of politics. Therefore, an understanding of basic political processes in Africa might do well to focus on such constitutive factors and concern itself less with notions that commit analysis to macro factors less relevant to local politics. The study of protest in Africa might benefit from the analytical freedom to refrain from considering every form of contestation to be political. The cases of Angola and Mozambique briefly discussed can be used to draw attention to the need to define politics, and the context within which it becomes possible, before one draws conclusions concerning the overall meaning of contestation.

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