

**Rethinking African Development:  
what is the social base of Africa's alternatives in the era of neo-liberalism?**

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*Re-Thinking African Development: Beyond Impasse, Towards Alternatives*

***Abstract***

This paper aims to re-think and explore the question of popular participation in struggles for development and progressive social change in Africa. The language of participation, empowerment, and civil society has been thoroughly co-opted by the neo-liberal mainstream in development studies and practice, in a manner that removes any notion of radical politics and critique, and collective social struggle for structural change, from prevailing thinking about development. In addressing the call to rethink African development, the paper's point of departure is the assumption that progressive social change in Africa cannot come about through paternalism from the West, no matter how much this is cloaked in the language of partnership and empowerment. This is because progressive social change in Africa requires structural change, both within Africa and in the international economic order, and the Western capitalist powers throughout the twentieth century have made every effort to prevent such an outcome. The currently hegemonic development discourse advocating partnership and empowerment in civil society promotes a technocratic approach which offers only amelioration of the worst social effects of neo-liberal capitalist development. Progressive social change can only ever be the achievement of social struggle within Africa – albeit supported on the basis of solidarity (rather than pity, philanthropy, charity, humanitarianism) by progressive social forces elsewhere beyond Africa.

This paper seeks to provide a conceptual and substantive exploration of the question of the social base of struggles for alternatives in Africa, in the context of the neo-colonial social and international order. Over the past three decades, the process of neo-liberal reform through structural adjustment has engineered a re-alignment of social forces within Africa, and effected a renewed process of impoverishment for the majority (peasants, workers, unemployed, street children, the 'micro-entrepreneurs' of the 'informal sector') while enabling a new round of enrichment, through parasitic and corrupt primitive accumulation, for the ruling elite. In some contexts the extent of resultant social inequality is vast and growing – for example Kenya has been identified as one of the ten most unequal societies in the world. The distinct form of impoverishment and deprivation produced by structural adjustment results in social exclusion and conditions of structural violence. These conditions have in some cases given rise to community-based organised resistance, but such conditions are as likely to lead to crime, drug-use and alcoholism as to collective resistance and struggle for alternatives. What are the social conditions of possibility for real alternatives in Africa? What forms of social and political organisation and strategy, and what kinds of political ideology, are required or possible given the concrete conditions of the social order of neo-liberalism? This paper explores these contradictions, with reference to social conditions in Kenya, and informed by the theoretical work of Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral and Antonio Gramsci.

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“Between 1954 and 1957, I was detained and jailed in several jails for undertaking and administering oaths to the members of Mau Mau. ... As we fought for independence, we waited with anticipation for the fruits of our labour and regaining our land which the colonialists had taken forcefully from us. We also wished to see the fighting and suffering come to an end and were indeed happy when freedom was finally granted in 1963. Those were my happiest moments. However, things never went as we expected. Instead of being rewarded by regaining our land, we were asked to buy it from the colonialists. This was very disgusting and frustrating. ... I am still bitter when I remember those days of suffering and detention. ...

I am equally sad that the generations at present can not be looked upon to reverse the order. Our youths are sunk into drugs and very much after money. This is evident during elections where they are offered money to vote for undeserving leaders.”

(Francis Thuo Kiai, resident of Mji wa Huruma slum, Nairobi)<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

This paper represents an initial step in the development of a research project rather than presentation of results of period of sustained research. The research and this paper is motivated by the need for alternatives in Africa, on one hand, and on the other hand by unease at the celebratory embrace of resistance and anti-globalisation by the left in the west. This paper is concerned with conditions and possibilities of progressive social change. It assumes as a point of departure that the current capitalist world order is incapable of producing progressive social change in Africa that can bring lasting benefits to the majority. The global development of capitalism, through its colonial and neo-colonial periods, has brought deepening poverty, inequality, exploitation and deprivation to the majority of Africa's population over centuries, while nevertheless enabling enormous enrichment for the elites or ruling classes. Progressive social change must therefore entail significant reform and, ultimately, transcendence of the logics of capitalism and imperialism. This paper offers preliminary reflections regarding conditions and possibilities of ‘human solidarity and historical agency’ (Davis 2004: 12) in the very specific context of neo-liberal-colonialism in Africa today.

The motivation of this paper is *not* to deny the existence of organised resistance and movements for social change in Africa, nor the incipient coalescing of a broader global movement across regions and continents. The role of popular movements has been central in undermining authoritarian rule over the past two decades (Mamdani and Wamba-dia-Wamba 1995, Anyang' Nyong'o 1988). Clearly the various regional and World Social Forums are significant, constituting new spheres of political activity and consciousness, new forms of relations and solidarities. But it is perhaps easier to write about emancipation and social transformation than to achieve these massive goals. This paper is motivated by a concern to take very seriously the enormous constraints and obstacles which confront the quest for significant social change. These

obstacles are rooted in the structures of economy and political rule, including the privatised sphere of rule governing the market; they are rooted in the international economy and the increasingly internationalised quality of local economies. It is the fact of the present neo-colonial structures of power which necessitate a broad-based, mass politics. But what are the conditions of possibility of mass-based political struggle in Africa? What are the social conditions of the masses, and what forms of political consciousness and social practice do such conditions give rise to?

This paper does not intend to be deliberately pessimistic with regard to possibilities and existence of political struggle and progressive social change in Africa. The level of general conceptual analysis set out here is not a substitute for concrete research, but rather, a prior exercise in ground-clearing. The discussion has been motivated by the seriousness of the socio-economic crisis in Africa, and dissatisfaction with the ease with which many academics, at least in the West, embrace and celebrate instances of perceived 'resistance' and 'agency' among the oppressed. It is also inspired specifically by the important and unique study of the concrete conditions of social exclusion in Mozambique, carried out by a team of researchers led by Carlos Serra (Serra 2003) which foregrounds the lived experience of the excluded in Mozambique's neo-liberal market society.

The paper is structured in three parts. The first part discusses the different approaches in the literature to the question of social change and struggles for alternatives in Africa. It argues that the social base of struggles for Africa's alternatives must be recognised as the urban and rural masses, or exploited classes, whose interests are generally contradicted by the status quo of neo-colonial capitalism. The dominant approach which conceives of 'civil society' as a sphere of autonomous actors and organisations pursuing progressive social change through professional and technocratic reform is rejected as apolitical. The second section turns to the work of Gramsci, Fanon and Cabral, and discusses their insights into the possibilities and difficulties of political struggle for social change in capitalist and neo-colonial societies. All three emphasise the need for broad-based alliances between different groups of the oppressed or subaltern classes. They recognise, however, the difficulties for collective political struggle posed by the differing political consciousness arising from the concrete condition and lived experiences of the poor in different contexts. The third section provides a preliminary discussion of the social conditions of the poor in Kenya, focusing mainly on the urban poor. The condition of poverty in a neo-colonial market society leads as much to individualised survival strategies as to organised political struggle. Nevertheless there are a number of organisations working among the urban poor. In light of the first two parts, it is argued that considerable caution is required before embracing the activities of NGOs seeking to support movements and organisations of the urban poor.

## **1. Social inquiry and the quest for alternatives in the neo-liberal era**

Africa's condition of underdevelopment has not been ignored. On the contrary, there is an infinity of well-meaning and hegemonic responses in the form of endless reports, surveys, league tables, data-gathering and fact-finding missions from international organisations, think tanks and consultants in the Development Industry. Much of the

academic literature on Africa's current condition increasingly mirrors that of the Development Industry. While the knowledge thus produced seems excessive in quantity, its content tends for the most part to suffer from two major weaknesses.

The first weakness of dominant approaches regards the *political* nature of the production of social conditions and the quest for social change. The literature and practice of development has become increasingly managerial over the past two decades, in the context of neo-liberal reform and structural adjustment. A whole variety of Non-Governmental Organisations, from local community-based organisations to large and well-funded international NGOs, have proliferated, largely as service-providers stepping in in the wake of state retrenchment under structural adjustment and the shifting of costs to 'consumers'. This development has been widely welcomed, and celebrated as evidence of a healthy 'civil society' and a strengthening of 'democratisation'. The mainstream approach to social change and development focuses on this sphere of so-called civil society, conceived as an arena for activity, organisation and association autonomous from the state and above or beyond the private sphere of the family (Diamond 1994). NGOs are conceived as actors which operate within, or actually constitute, civil society, through serving the interests of local people using more direct and legitimate models of participation and representation than the 'top-down' structures and institutions of the state (Edwards and Hulme 1992, Oyugi 2004, Ndegwa 1996). The language of governance is the pinnacle of the managerial approach which conceives the condition of poverty and underdevelopment and the need for progressive social change as questions of technocratic policy.

The question of Africa's alternatives is however inherently political rather than technocratic. The political project of neo-liberal reform since the 1980s has been implemented and supported by, and has served the interests of, Africa's ruling classes, the elites. Neo-liberal reform has also realigned social forces through accumulation and dispossession, creating new elites. Neo-liberal reform and adjustment has enabled or effected a redistribution of wealth within societies, from the poor to the rich, from the middle-classes to the rich and super-rich (Mamdani 1994). Any progressive alternatives for Africa's future must be premised on improving conditions for the masses of African societies, who have suffered ongoing exploitation and impoverishment since the days of colonial rule. Fanon's observation that "in the majority of cases, for ninety-five per cent of the population of under-developed countries, independence brings no immediate change" (Fanon 1967: 59) requires updating; for perhaps at least half of the population of African countries and in some cases more, the decades of independence have brought *negative* change as social conditions have unravelled and collapsed.

The social basis of alternatives in Africa is thus not the upper classes or elites, but the masses: the popular urban and rural classes, whose ranks have been swelled by Structural Adjustment's decimation of the middle classes. The current structures of power and accumulation, namely the relations of neo-colonial capitalism, produce wretched conditions for the masses, the majority of the population, the low-skilled / unskilled workers, unemployed, peasants, street-vendors, and lower professional classes – teachers, university lecturers, while enabling grotesque levels of luxury through parasitic accumulation for the elite in combination with the foreign bourgeoisie. The underlying structural relations of this neo-colonial condition means

that any possibility of real alternatives requires significant changes in the political and economic structures of society – the structures of rule and the structures of accumulation and distribution. Of course the two are related – but they must be considered together, not in isolation. Fanon’s argument for decolonisation applies today in the search for alternatives from neo-liberal neo-colonialism:

To tell the truth, the proof of success lies in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up. The extraordinary importance of this change is that it is willed, called for, demanded. The need for this change exists in its crude state, impetuous and compelling, in the consciousness and in the lives of the men and women who are colonized.

(Fanon 1967: 27).

It is therefore necessary to insist on *radical* alternatives. The professional bureaucrats of ‘civil society’ function largely to *contain* the excesses of this system rather than to enable significant, structural social change. The multiplication of international NGOs does, undeniably, bring specific concrete benefits, but these benefits – a new school, a new bore-hole, a local health campaign, free condoms or malaria nets – are inherently limited and localised in the project or target area and budget period, and thus contingent on the luck of the chosen target area and precarious funding horizons and priorities. For the most part, international NGOs offer only ameliorative solutions, while in some cases deliberately promoting very specific forms of social change, values and institutions, namely those of or appropriate for the liberal free market. Rarely do the activities of NGOs effect broader, structural and long-lasting improvement in social conditions. Meanwhile, accompanying the localised immediate benefits of NGOs comes the jargon of professional ‘civil society’ – empowerment, participation, capacity building, micro-entrepreneurs, and good governance. The radical impulse of such notions as empowerment and popular participation has been diluted through their co-optation by the front-line of neo-liberal reform. There is a wide variety of actors and organisations which operate in the sphere of so-called civil society and it is necessary to delineate the differences between well-funded international NGOs, and grass-roots organisations. Nevertheless the sphere of civil society which is celebrated in development circles tends to accept rather than seek to change the basic structures of economy and society, and hence to avoid politics. The deliberate celebration and incorporation of civil society by the advocates of neo-liberal reform produces a managerial, technocratic and localised conception of politics and social change.

Different basic conceptions of ‘civil society’ rest on different underlying assumptions about the nature of society and consequently the requirements or conditions for progressive social change. The dominant approach to civil society rests on a liberal understanding of society, as a mass of private individuals, together with a liberal understanding of (and antipathy towards) the state. In contrast a historical materialist approach rests on an understanding of society as composed of structured social relations between different groups and classes whose interests, in capitalist societies, are generally opposed. The state and civil society are not understood as separate isolatable realms, but as mutually related aspects of the social formation as a whole, and both characterised by contradictory social relations (in Gramsci’s terms, political society and civil society are not equivalent to state and non-state, but “constitutive elements of a single, integral entity – the modern bourgeois-liberal state” (Buttigieg

1995: 28). These different underlying models of society inform very different assumptions about the requirements and possibilities of progressive social change – or, in contemporary language, ‘poverty reduction’. The liberal approach pursues poverty reduction within the context of the existing structure of state, society and economy, through specific measures and reforms targeted at the poor. The specifically neo-liberal approach favours private philanthropy and ‘self-help’, against the more social-democratic commitment to providing universal welfare through social redistribution. The celebration of civil society, agency and empowerment which has come to dominate Development Studies and much of Africanist Studies since the early 1990s fits neatly within the neo-liberal project. A historical materialist approach, in contrast, sees the conditions of poverty, oppression, marginalisation and exploitation as relational, produced necessarily by the existing structures of state, society and economy. Therefore the goal of progressive social change must be to transform the structures of the social order – the relations of power and production – rather than pursue piecemeal reforms which leave those structures intact or further entrench them.

The outcome of the mainstream liberal approach is to effectively remove or silence the inherently political nature of struggles for and processes of progressive social change; to abstract organisational forms and activities from the structure or ensemble of social relations within which they exist; and thus to depoliticise state-society relations. The celebratory analysis of ‘civil society’ in terms of organisational forms and networks is silent on the class relations and interests manifest in the various local and international members of ‘civil society’. However while presenting a depoliticised conception of so-called civil society, this approach serves to further the political, neo-colonial project of neo-liberal reform, by celebrating the sphere of the private individual against the abstractly-conceived state and thus legitimising the dismantling of state services and public goods.

A more profound, underlying weakness characterising much analysis in Africanist and Development Studies scholarship is the failure to adequately historicise social phenomena and social conditions. Africanist and Development Studies scholarship routinely employs analytical terms which have been abstracted from an idealised history of Western Europe (Mamdani 1995, Mamdani 1996, Ayers 2004). This ahistorical or de-historicised form of analysis is the second major weakness of the dominant approaches. The historical specificity of conditions and relations, structures of power and accumulation in Africa is over-looked as the universal applicability of conceptual categories arising from a particular Western historical context is assumed. This tends not only to ignore the specificity of African conditions, but also the historical conditions, processes and struggles in Europe which gave rise to such categories – thereby removing politics and history twice over.

In contrast to the mainstream of Development and Africanist scholarship, which tends to depoliticise the notion of social change, critical scholars in International Relations have focussed centrally on questions of resistance, emancipation and social transformation. This has entailed theoretical work which foregrounds emancipation and empirical studies of anti-globalisation resistance<sup>2</sup>. Against the apolitical assumptions of the dominant liberal scholarship, critical scholars foreground explicitly the political nature of social change, and the imperative of resistance and struggle rather than reform and philanthropy. There is a large and growing body of

critical scholarship examining anti-globalisation and anti-capitalist resistance and the emergence of local, regional and global movements for progressive social change and transformation. This literature has grown in the wake of the 'Battle of Seattle', and includes analyses of the World Social Forums and particular instances of overt anti-globalisation demonstrations, as well as specific movements and campaigns in different places, from Mexico to South Africa.<sup>3</sup> Seddon and Zeilig, for example, claim that

There is now emerging a cluster of movements and groupings which are explicitly – ideologically and politically – linked to similar movements of protest elsewhere in the world and which draw strength and vitality from international links to form the beginnings of a truly global movement of dissent against the dominant form of global capitalism – specifically US and more generally 'Western' imperialism. This is happening in many parts of Africa.

(Seddon and Zeilig 2005: 23)

While much of this (often celebratory) literature examines existing movements and organisations, less attention is paid to the broader or prior question of the social conditions of possibility of organised resistance: the social and material condition of the oppressed, marginalised and exploited, and the forms of consciousness and action to which such conditions give rise. Seddon and Zeilig assert, rather than demonstrate, that the diverse members of the popular classes of African societies "often share a consciousness of their interdependency and common vulnerability" (2005: 12). Moreover, even radical western scholarship is sometimes guilty of failure to adequately historicise concrete conditions, especially the specificity of the colonial and post- or neo-colonial condition and social relations. The eurocentric failure to adequately historicise social conditions is thus not unique to mainstream Africanist approaches, but is a far broader tendency in social inquiry. Much critical scholarship either rests on implicit assumptions regarding the forms and content of political struggle, organisation and ideology, which are informed by particular historical experiences of proletarian class struggles in advanced industrialised societies, or embraces any form of apparent organised resistance. Much theoretical and empirical writing by critical left academics in the west suggests an optimism about the possibilities and existence of emancipatory or transformatory possibilities and praxis. The increasing celebration of the anti-globalisation movement or global justice movement (Rupert 2000) is part of a broader tendency among left-liberal scholars: an almost defiant embrace of the agency and *resistance* of the subaltern. However the popular critical alternative – the celebration of 'weapons of the weak' or the performance of the 'multitude'<sup>4</sup> – is insufficient. It is not enough to celebrate the agency of the poor, when that agency is expressed in ways that adjust life *to* structural constraints, rather than aiming at or achieving the adjustment *of* structural constraints. Nor is it enough to uncritically celebrate each and every instance of organised resistance and social movement, without acknowledging the often contradictory ideologies, agendas, strategies and goals of the various strands of the anti-globalisation movement.

One of the major weaknesses of both mainstream and, to some extent, critical approaches is, therefore, the failure to adequately historicise social conditions, relations and struggles. In the mainstream literature, this neglect of historical

specificity is combined with liberal assumptions and results in an apolitical notion of social change as an essentially private endeavour, organised by private individuals and organisations, in the context of a generally harmonious social order. Whether intentional or unwitting, such an approach to ‘development’ is consistent with the neo-liberal project of societal and economic adjustment in the interests of private accumulation and global capital. The critical literature, on the other hand, in its enthusiastic embrace of resistance *per se*, often underplays the contradictions and obstacles which constrain possibilities of radical social change. The next section discusses the insights of Gramsci, Fanon and Cabral with regard to these questions. The conditions of neo-liberal-colonialism are different in important ways from the situation of the first struggle for independence. Nevertheless in the current context it is helpful to return to the writings of Cabral and Fanon, as well as Gramsci, for insights into the question of the social conditions of possibility of mass political struggle. All three were engaged in revolutionary struggles, and developed theoretical insights regarding the imperatives and contradictions of political organisation and consciousness.

## **2. The social conditions of political consciousness and political struggle**

This section considers the insights which can be gained from scholars who have foregrounded the relationship between concrete social conditions, political consciousness, and the possibilities of political struggle for radical social change, focusing on the work of Gramsci, Fanon and Cabral. It is the underlying principles of method rather than the empirical content which unites the Western historical materialist tradition and the theorists of anti-colonial struggle. In their very different historical and social contexts, Gramsci, Fanon and Cabral all took very seriously the question of the social conditions of the rural and urban masses, and the problem of political consciousness and organisation, in relation to possibilities of radical political struggle.

### *Gramsci*

Gramsci’s work, situated within the historical materialist tradition, paid particular attention to the relationships between social conditions of the various oppressed or exploited classes, the form, content and level of their political consciousness, and the possibility of organised political struggle for progressive social change. Three aspects of Gramsci’s approach and thought will be emphasised here: first, his methodological emphasis on historical specificity; second, his notion of subaltern classes and an explicitly political conception of struggle for progressive social change; third, his reflections on the different stages and requirements of actual political struggles of subaltern classes.

Gramsci’s method of analysis, consistent with historical materialism, foregrounded above all the need to recognise the historical specificity of social relations and conditions. In his notebooks, Gramsci ‘repeatedly pours scorn on ready-made explanatory formulas and repudiates prefabricated, ahistorical interpretations of “reality”.’ (Buttigieg 1999: 437). The task of the analyst is ‘to “translate” the elements of historical life into theoretical language, but not vice versa, making reality conform to an abstract scheme. Reality will never conform to an abstract scheme, and therefore this conception is nothing but an expression of passivity.’ (§ 48, ‘Past and present:



Spontaneity and conscious leadership’, Gramsci 1996: 52). In a manner similar to Marx, and subsequent dialectical thinkers (such as Bertell Ollman and Roy Bhaskar)<sup>5</sup>, Gramsci understood social phenomena in relational rather than atomistic terms (Morera 1990). It is therefore not possible from his writings to extract a definitive, discrete definition of particular concepts and theories, which, in a self-contained form, can then be applied to different contexts. This is not a reflection of the fragmentary nature of his writings, especially the *Prison Notebooks*, but rather of his understanding of social phenomena, in their historical and relational forms (Buttigieg 1992b). Joseph Buttigieg explains:

when fragments or particular pieces of information or specific observations lead to some general or generalizing insight, the generalization does not acquire the status of an overarching theory which endows the particulars with a stable meaning while remaining itself autonomous from them. The generalizations or concepts are themselves never complete or completed, they are always in a fluid, increasingly complex relation to other generalizations or concepts; they always point to different synthetic combinations, but without ever settling into a final definitive synthesis; and they always call for a return to the particular details, the fragments which retain their historical specificity even as they induce new and more complex concepts that are linked to one another in an increasingly dense and ever more extensive shifting network of relations.

(Buttigieg 1992a: 66-67).

Gramsci insisted on the need for conceptual and theoretical work to be informed by historical detail, for analysis to move from concrete conditions to conceptual or theoretical development rather than other way around. Attention to the historical specificity of social phenomena is thus central to Gramsci’s method, as manifest in his own scholarly practice. The other side of this is the rejection of positivism and abstract scholasticism, which “warns against the danger of rushing to conclusions, and [...] invites attention to the particular” (Buttigieg 1992a: 81). Gramsci advocated a method or approach of criticism and ‘philology’ – the detailed attention to specific, concrete conditions, to history as lived experience. As Buttigieg argues, “These methods, as they are employed in the notebooks, also function simultaneously as a weapon and a shield against all forms of dogmatism and mystification.” (1992a: 82).

These methodological concerns were central to Gramsci’s political analysis. Gramsci’s work is a development of the historical materialist tradition and he was centrally concerned with the organisation and form of power in society, and the possibilities for and constraints against socialist transformation. Gramsci saw that the exploitation of dominated social groups is rooted in and caused by the structured political and economic relations in the society as a whole, and specifically the relations between the dominated and dominant social classes. Therefore any real, significant improvement of conditions for the dominated groups requires not merely amelioration of their social conditions through policy reform, but a much deeper restructuring of political and economic relations in society as a whole. Such social or societal change could only be the outcome of social and political struggle, and would require the collaboration of different groups of oppressed classes, including both rural and urban groups.

Gramsci recognised the complexity of social relations and conditions in any social formation, as did Marx and Lenin. Gramsci used the term ‘subaltern’ to refer broadly to groups in society who were dominated and marginalised, subordinate to the ruling classes: slaves, peasants, religious groups, women, different races, and the proletariat (Green 2002: 2). In analytical or objective terms, the various subaltern classes share a common condition or relation of domination and exploitation, but the actual situations, experiences, relations and understandings of different subaltern classes vary considerably. Moreover, Gramsci underlined the inherently or historically *fragmented* quality of subaltern classes:

The historical unity of the ruling classes is found in the state, and their history is essentially the history of states and of groups of states. This unity must be concrete, hence it is the outcome of the relations between the state and “civil society.” For the subaltern classes, the unification does not occur; their history is intertwined with the history of “civil society”; it is a disjointed segment of that history

(§ 90, ‘History of the subaltern classes’, Gramsci 1996: 91)

The structural position of subordination shared by different subaltern groups or classes necessitates building coalitions and alliances, especially, for example, between urban and rural classes, and between workers and the unemployed. However the very different concrete conditions and historical experiences which fragment the subaltern classes constitute a real constraint against realising broad popular participation and collaboration in social and political struggle to change society.

The questions of political consciousness and political organisation – that is, how people understand their situation and what kinds of action they take to change their situation – are therefore central to the possibility of progressive and radical social change in the interests of the masses or subaltern classes. However, the concrete social conditions experienced and suffered by the various members of the subaltern classes do not automatically give rise to a unified and broad consciousness of the causes of their condition, still less of their shared interests with other marginalised groups. The need for political organisation and education is thus crucial. Gramsci recognised that forms of social and political organisation and leadership might already exist within subaltern groups, which can form the basis for a broader political movement and struggle. However, it is necessary to develop existing organisations and alliances, especially through education, in order to improve upon and deepen the already-held understandings of the causes of social conditions, and the imperatives of unified political struggle. Such consciousness does not arise automatically. The prevailing understanding of social conditions, which Gramsci conceived in terms of ‘common-sense’, is produced on one hand through lived experience and on the other hand by and through existing popular culture, reinforced by the numerous ideological forces and institutions in society (the media, the church, education and so on). It is thus necessary to subject to critique, and to improve upon, the existing ‘common-sense’ understanding and self-consciousness of the subaltern classes. Such education should not consist of imposing abstract concepts and theoretical dogma, however. It must be informed by a close and detailed knowledge and understanding of the actual conditions, histories and culture of subaltern groups, their daily preoccupations, beliefs and concerns. Political movements required effective leadership:

not an “abstract” leadership; it did not consist in the mechanical repetition of scientific or theoretical formulas; it did not confuse politics – real action – with theoretical disquisition. It devoted itself to real people in specific historical relations, with specific sentiments, ways of life, fragments of worldviews, etc., that were outcomes of the “spontaneous” combinations of a given environment of material production with the “fortuitous” gathering of disparate social elements within that same environment. This element of “spontaneity” was not neglected, much less disdained: it was *educated*, it was given a direction, it was cleansed of everything extraneous that could contaminate it, in order to unify it by means of modern theory but in a living, historically effective manner.

(§ 48, ‘Past and present: Spontaneity and conscious leadership’, Gramsci 1996: 50).

None of this is automatic. Just as subaltern groups’ already existing ‘common-sense’ or spontaneous awareness of their condition might not provide a broad consciousness of the social causes of their oppression, the existing movements and actions of subaltern groups are not necessarily progressive. Gramsci discusses how the spontaneous movements of subaltern classes can be taken further by more advanced, progressive subaltern leadership and organisations; but equally if not more likely, they can be taken further by reactionary right-wing organisations:

It is almost always the case that a “spontaneous” movement of the subaltern classes is matched by a reactionary movement of the right wing of the dominant class, for concomitant reasons: an economic crisis, for example, produces, on one hand, discontent among the subaltern classes and spontaneous mass movements and, on the other, conspiracies by reactionary groups, who take advantage of the objective enfeeblement of the government to attempt coups d’état.

(§ 48, ‘Past and present: Spontaneity and conscious leadership’, Gramsci 1996: 51).

In his reflections on the history and struggles of subaltern groups, Gramsci conceived of different stages each requiring attention and analysis. First, one must study ‘the objective formation of the subaltern classes through the developments and changes that took place in the economic sphere; the extent of their diffusion; and their descent from other classes that preceded them’. Second, ‘their passive or active adherence to the dominant political formations; that is, their efforts to influence the programs of these formulations with demands of their own’. Third, ‘the birth of new parties of the ruling class to maintain control of the subaltern classes’. Fourth, ‘the formations of the subaltern classes themselves, formations of a limited and partial character’. Fifth, ‘the political formations that assert the political autonomy of the subaltern classes, but within the old framework’. Finally, ‘the political formations that assert complete autonomy etc’ ((§ 90, ‘History of the subaltern classes’, Gramsci 1996: 91). This scheme reflects Gramsci’s awareness that there is nothing automatic about the progressive or radical character of subaltern political consciousness, political organisation and struggle. On the contrary, the history and struggles of subaltern groups are more likely to be fragmentary, and vulnerable to co-optation or defeat.

Gramsci's writings are enormously rich and extensive, and here only selected themes among many have been highlighted and presented in summary. A more thorough understanding must situate these themes and concepts within the totality of Gramsci's work; Gramsci's understanding of subaltern groups and struggles is integrally related to the rest of his work (Green 2002). What is important, in this context, is Gramsci's explicit attention to the historical specificity of social conditions, and his insistence that this provide the basis both of social analysis and political struggle; his emphasis on the need for critique and education, which engages with but does not accept uncritically the existing or 'spontaneous' understanding and activities of the subaltern classes; and his acknowledgement of the diverse, fragmentary and contradictory social conditions of subaltern groups. In reflecting on forms and possibilities of alternatives in Africa today, these insights should be heeded.

Gramsci's attention was directed mainly at Italian society and history. His own methodological principles would demand that the specificity of the colonial and neo-colonial condition of Africa be central to social and political inquiry. The various subaltern groups or classes in African societies are the outcome or product of very different historical processes to those of Italy, and that historical and contemporary context must be analysed theoretically and historically in its own right; for as Fanon argued, "Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem" (Fanon 1967: 31). Here the insights of Fanon and Cabral are crucial.

### *Fanon*

Frantz Fanon foregrounded the historical specificity of the colonial and neo-colonial situation, and the various implications for possibilities and necessities of political struggle for change. First, as already noted above, he insisted that the structural character of colonial oppression demanded structural transformation rather than formal, piecemeal reform. Such structural transformation could only come about through broad-based, collective struggle. Thus among the themes of Fanon's work, central preoccupations are the requirement for and constraints against unity in collective struggle. Second, he emphasised the ways in which the specific nature of the colonial and neo-colonial structure differed profoundly from that of the Western industrialised countries. His analyses of the independence struggle highlighted the differing social conditions, and forms or levels of consciousness, of different social groups, including the small urban proletariat, the urban 'lumpenproletariat', the rural peasants, and the dominant classes in the countryside – chiefs and administrators. In doing so he was alert always to the specificity of the colonial and neo-colonial situation; for example: "Here, we are not dealing with the old antagonism between town and country; it is the antagonism which exists between the native who is excluded from the advantages of colonialism and his counterpart who manages to turn colonial exploitation to his account." (Fanon 1967: 89).

The point of departure of Fanon's analysis of the anti-colonial struggle is the specificity of colonised societies, and the need for political strategies and organisational forms to reflect and grow out of the specific social realities of the colonial society rather than being based on imported models from the very different social conditions of industrialised societies: "the weakness of political parties does not

only lie in the mechanical application of an organization which was created to carry on the struggle of the working class inside a highly industrialized, capitalist society. ... The great mistake, the inherent defect in the majority of political parties in under-developed regions has been, following traditional lines, to approach in the first place those elements which are the most politically conscious: the working classes in the towns, the skilled workers and the civil servants – that is to say, a tiny proportion of the population, which hardly represents more than one per cent.” (Fanon 1967: 86.)

Fanon exposed the multiple contradictions of the colonial struggle for independence, rooted in the contradictions of the colonial social order, which could be shielded under the common front of anti-colonialism and the ‘claim to nationhood’. But these contradictions expose themselves, sooner or later, in the unravelling of unity into factional struggles, ethnic chauvinism, and the enduring misery of the masses even after formal independence. In his analysis of the struggle for independence, Fanon analyses the divisions between different social groups and the failure to overcome these inherited divisions. He criticises the lack of understanding of urban based nationalist parties who try to go out and educate the rural masses instead of trying to understand them and work with them, and the urban –based trade union leaders who, having lost contact with the peasantry, focus only on the urban workers at the expense of the ‘disinherited rural population’ (1967: 96). The problem with bourgeois or elite politics is its lack of organic relationship with the rural and urban masses, and the living culture of society. He concludes: “This unhealthy state of affairs simply shows the objective necessity of a social programme which will appeal to the nation as a whole.” (Fanon 1967: 97-98).

Fanon foregrounded the historically specific classes of colonised societies, and their social and political conditions, emphasising the small size and relatively privileged position of the classes of urban workers and middle class professionals, and on the other hand the political significance of both the peasantry and the ‘lumpenproletariat’ - the ‘pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed and the petty criminals’, ‘classless idlers’, ... ‘the prostitutes too, and the maids who are paid two pounds a month, all the hopeless dregs of humanity, all who turn in circles between suicide and madness” (Fanon 1967: 103-4). He argued that these classes were crucial to the anti-colonial struggle:

The men whom the growing population of the country districts and colonial expropriation have brought to desert their family holdings circle tirelessly around the different towns, hoping that one day or another they will be allowed inside. It is within this mass of humanity, this people of the shanty towns, at the core of the *lumpen-proletariat* that the rebellion will find its urban spearhead. For the *lumpen-proletariat*, that horde of starving men, uprooted from their tribe and from their clan, constitutes one of the most spontaneous and the most radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people.  
(Fanon 1967: 102-3)

While he underlined their potential revolutionary qualities he also advocated the importance of raising a clear political consciousness, highlighting the pitfalls of spontaneity, and recognising the potentially reactionary character of both peasantry and *lumpen-proletariat*. The experience of the *lumpen-proletariat* is one characterised by violence: the violence of frustrated need and dispossession, and the violence of the

state authority (both colonial and neo-colonial). Fanon's description of Kenya in the 1950s remains valid today:

The police forces and the missionaries coordinated their efforts ... in order to make a suitable response to the enormous influx of young Kenyans coming from the country districts and the forests who, when they did not manage to find a market for their labour, took to stealing, debauchery and alcoholism. Juvenile delinquency in the colonized countries is the direct result of the experience of the *lumpen-proletariat*.

(Fanon 1967: 103)

Fanon was particularly sensitive to the very different conditions and experiences enjoyed or suffered in urban and rural areas, and recognised the importance but also the difficulty in forging unity in struggle and consciousness across this spatial and social divide. In some cases the process of decolonisation leads to armed struggle, which can bring about some kind of unity of purpose and feeling of solidarity across the divisions of tribe, ethnicity, town and countryside (Fanon 1967: 102-106). However, Fanon warns, such spontaneous, conjectural moments of solidarity and unity, precisely because they are not the result of careful political education and preparation, tend to be fragile and short-lived: "we should make it quite clear that this spontaneous impetuosity which is determined to settle the fate of the colonial system immediately is condemned, in so far as it is a doctrine of instantaneity, to self-repudiation." (Fanon 1967: 106-7). Given the structural character of the colonial society and economy, and hence the necessity for structural change to bring real decolonisation, struggles informed only by the frustration and grievances of the rural and urban masses cannot be enough. Fanon emphasizes the crucial and historical necessity of political education of the masses, because of the inherent weaknesses and limitations of struggles based only on 'spontaneity', on raw resentments, racial feeling or hatred of the coloniser: "hatred alone cannot draw up a programme" (Fanon 1967: 111). The imperative of decolonisation required a more directed form of political struggle:

The leaders of the rebellion come to see that even very large-scale peasant risings need to be controlled and directed into certain channels, these leaders are led to renounce the movement in so far as it can be termed a peasant revolt, and to transform it into a revolutionary war. They discover that the success of the struggle presupposes clear objectives, a definite methodology and above all the need for the mass of the people to realize that their unorganized efforts can only be a temporary dynamic. You can hold out for three days – maybe even for three months – on the strength of the admixture of sheer resentment contained in the mass of the people; but you won't win a national war, you'll never overthrow the terrible enemy machine, and you won't change human beings if you forget to raise the standard of consciousness of the rank-and-file. Neither stubborn courage nor fine slogans are enough.

(Fanon 1967: 108)

Fanon wrote passionately about the inherited and reproduced divisions between the different strata of colonial and neo-colonial society, which most independence movements and forms of nationalist political struggle not only failed to overcome but

actually deepened. He dwells in particular on the distrust, dismissal and lack of understanding displayed by urban-based political leaders towards the rural population, and the fatal consequences of such attitudes for the independence struggle and post-independence politics. He was insistent, therefore, that political education and organisation should above all be decentralised and democratic, a process of mutual learning between town and countryside. Political leaders and party members should always maintain active contact with the rural and urban masses, rather than remaining in the privileged capital city:

Only too frequently the political bureau, unfortunately, consists of all the party and its members who reside permanently in the capital. In an underdeveloped country, the leading members of the party ought to avoid the capital as if it had the plague. They ought, with some few exceptions, to live in the country districts. ...we who are citizens of the under-developed countries, we ought to seek every occasion for contacts with the rural masses. We must create a national policy, in other words a policy for the masses. We ought never to lose contact with the people which has battled for its independence and for the concrete betterment of its existence. ... The native civil servants and technicians ought not to bury themselves in diagrams and statistics, but rather in the heart of the people. They ought not to bristle up every time there is question of a move to be made to the 'interior'. ... In an under-developed country the party ought to be organized in such fashion that it is not simply content with having contact with the masses. The party should be the direct expression of the masses. The party is not an administration responsible for transmitting government orders; it is the energetic spokesman and the incorruptible defender of the masses.

(Fanon 1967: 149-151)

Thus Fanon clearly emphasised the need for raising the political consciousness of the rural and urban classes in the context of political struggle to change society, but simultaneously insisted that political organisation, discussion and strategy must be rooted in the everyday experiences, language and understanding of the masses: "The politician should not ignore the fact that the future remains a closed book so long as the consciousness of the people remains imperfect, elementary and cloudy. We African politicians must have very clear ideas on the situation of our people. But this clarity of ideas much be profoundly dialectical ... To hold a responsible position in an under-developed country is to know that in the end everything depends on the education of the masses, on the raising of the level of thought, and on what we are too quick to call 'political teaching'" (Fanon 1967: 156-9).

Fanon's enormously insightful analysis of neo-colonialism, led by the self-interested, parasitic class of national bourgeoisie, reveals clearly the historical specificity of the neo-colonial state and social order. After independence, for the most part, the power of the dominant classes led by the national bourgeoisie was upheld not by hegemony in the realm of civil society – by manufactured consent backed up where necessary with coercion, as in Gramsci's analysis of the bourgeois state of Western industrialised democracies. The dominant classes ruled by coercion and force over a social order which grew ever more unequal and authoritarian: "the new caste is an affront all the more disgusting in that the immense majority, nine-tenths of the population, continue to die of starvation" (1967: 134).

## *Cabral*

Many of the themes and concerns of Fanon's writings were, unsurprisingly, also central to the thought and practice of Amílcar Cabral who, like Fanon, was involved at the heart of the struggle for liberation from colonial oppression. Portugal's refusal to negotiate the independence of her African colonies, and her brutal military war against the African independence movements, as well as the experiences of neo-colonialism in other parts of Africa which had already gained independence, revealed the necessity in the context of the Portuguese colonies not only for armed struggle for independence but revolutionary struggle for socialist transformation.

At the heart of Cabral's thought and practice was a deep sensitivity to the concrete reality and experience of different groups in society, and the profound importance of building a political strategy and organisation based on a detailed knowledge of social reality, of the structures of society, the diverse social, economic and cultural conditions and experiences of different groups. He was keenly aware of the importance of building alliances and coalitions among the various oppressed and exploited classes or groups, and constructing a collective, shared struggle founded on unity and solidarity, between worker and peasant, the unemployed and the middle classes. Only through a united struggle could the strength of Portuguese colonialism be overcome and the structures of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation transformed. Such unity was not spontaneous however, given the diverse and fragmented realities of the peoples of Guinea Bissau, and so had to be carefully constructed. This required, above all, a detailed understanding of people's everyday circumstances and experiences, their traditions and cultures, and the material basis of their lives. As Cabral made clear, the "analysis of the social situation ... has served as the basis for our struggle for national liberation" (Cabral 1969b: 46).

Like Fanon, Cabral also paid special attention to the different conditions of urban and rural life, and the importance of transcending such divisions and forging alliances between rural and urban classes. The population of the Portuguese colony of Guinea was composed of various African peoples, and so the question was more complicated than a simply dichotomy between urban and rural life. Cabral therefore carefully analysed the different structures of social relations and hierarchies characteristic of different societies in the rural areas, as well as the different positions of various groups or strata in urban areas. Thus a central feature of Cabral's method of analysis was careful empirical attention to the historical specificity of actual social forms, relations and conditions. Social and political analysis, and political strategy and organisation, had to be informed by detailed knowledge of actual social conditions, rather than formulated from imported categories, theories and strategies from elsewhere. This is a vital principle of method in social inquiry, foundational to historical materialism. In Cabral's work this principle did not arise from academic debate in isolation. Rather, such principles of analysis reflected and informed in a very direct sense the imperatives of political struggle against colonial rule. Cabral's methodological approach, resting on such awareness of the diversity of actual social conditions, was very much informed by his own direct experience of the whole of Guinea-Bissau society gained when he had been working as an agronomist for the



Portuguese government, and had conducted an agricultural survey of the entire country.

The political significance of carefully analysing social conditions and structures lies in identifying both objective and subjective opportunities and constraints for political struggle. Cabral's analysis of Guinea Bissau society revealed the different interests and loyalties of various social strata, both rural and urban: "this analysis has no value unless it is related to the actual struggle. In outline, the methodological approach we have used has been as follows: first, the position of each group must be defined – to what extent and in what way does each group depend on the colonial regime? Next we have to see what position they adopt towards the national liberation struggle. Then we have to study their nationalist capacity and lastly, envisaging the post-independence period, their revolutionary capacity." (Cabral 1969a: 48-49).

However Cabral was alert to the difficult question of social and political consciousness. He identified the peasantry, being the most exploited, as the group in society with the greatest objective interest in the anti-colonial struggle, 'given the nature of the various different societies in Guinea (feudal, semi-feudal etc) and the various degrees of exploitation to which they are subjected' (ibid.: 49). However, he was fully aware that "the question is not simply one of objective interest." (49). On the basis of analysis and experience, Cabral foregrounded the complex relationship between social conditions, structures, tradition and culture, and the question of political consciousness. Some groups were ready to support the political struggle, but others tended spontaneously to support the status quo. As Cabral reported, "in certain parts of the country and among certain groups we found a very warm welcome, even right at the start. In other groups and in other areas all this had to be won" (50); in such cases "thorough and intensive work was therefore needed to mobilise them" (49).

Cabral appreciated that the fact of suffering, deprivation, oppression and exploitation, did not in itself necessarily give rise in an automatic fashion to a political consciousness and tendency towards political struggle to change society. The peasantry in rural areas "are subjected to a kind of exploitation equivalent to slavery; but even if you try and explain to them that they are being exploited and robbed, it is difficult to convince them by means of an unexperienced explanation of a technico-economic kind that they are the most exploited people" (Cabral 1969a: 51-2). He understood that such consciousness was more likely to arise from a distinct awareness and experience of contrasting conditions of privilege and oppression. Such contrasts were visible to those who moved between rural and urban contexts, to "this other group of people in the towns, which we have been unable to classify precisely, which was still closely connected to the rural areas and contained people who spoke almost all the languages that are used in Guinea" (Cabral 1969a: 54-5). The importance of this group, often young people, who have migrated from countryside to stay with relatives in town and thus "have close relations with rural areas, as well as with the towns" (Cabral 1969a: 48), is that "this urban experience lies in the fact that it allows comparison: this is the key stimulant required for the awakening of consciousness" (Cabral 1969a: 51). The direct experience of working alongside Europeans also provided grounds for political consciousness, arising from the personal as well as social contradictions of oppression: "it is easier to convince the workers and the people employed in the towns who earn, say, 10 *escudos* a day for a job in which a

European earns between 30 and 50 that they are being subjected to massive exploitation and injustice, because they can see” (Cabral 1969a: 52). Thus Cabral described his own experience, as a member of the petty bourgeoisie: “I was an agronomist working under a European who everybody knew was one of the biggest idiots in Guinea; I could have taught him his job with my eyes shut but he was the boss: this is something which counts a lot, this is the confrontation which really matters” (Cabral 1969a: 52).

Cabral’s writings are saturated with keen awareness of the specificity of the social context, and of the futility of relying on imported concepts, theories and strategies. He rejected the constricted understanding of political struggle which generalises from the European experience: “There are a certain number of key words and concepts, there is a certain conditioning in the reasoning of our European friends: for example, when someone thinks, ‘revolution’, he thinks of the bourgeoisie falling., etc.; when someone thinks ‘party’, he forgets many things. Yesterday a friend asked me a number of questions about our party and several times I had to say to him, “but it isn’t a European party”; the concept of a party and the creation of parties did not occur simultaneously in Europe, they resulted from a long process of class struggle. When we in Africa think of creating a party now we find ourselves in very different conditions from those in which parties appeared as historico-social phenomena in Europe. This has a number of consequences, so when you think “party”, “single party”, etc. you must connect all these things up with the history and conditions of Africa” (Cabral 1969a: 55-6). With regard to the question of intellectuals, he relates:

“We also looked for intellectuals, but there were none, because the Portuguese did not educate people. In any case, what is an intellectual in our country? It could probably be someone who knew the general situation very well, who had some knowledge, not profound theoretical knowledge, but concrete knowledge of the country itself and of its life, as well as of our enemy” (54).

### **3. Social conditions of the masses in Africa today**

In light of the preceding discussion of the work of Gramsci, Cabral and Fanon, this final section of the paper turns to the concrete conditions of the neo-liberal present in Africa, with specific reference to Kenya. The aim is to consider the social conditions suffered by the majority today – the oppressed or exploited, the urban and rural poor, the subaltern classes – and to explore what kinds of reactions and responses such conditions engender. This concrete condition is the context of actual or potential political struggles. What forms and possibilities of political consciousness and political struggle can and do arise today? At this stage the context of the urban poor is focused on, but at a later stage the rural context will be brought into the analysis.

Over the past two decades, the process of neo-liberal reform through structural adjustment has engineered a re-alignment of social forces within Africa, and effected a renewed process of impoverishment for the majority – peasants, workers, unemployed, street children, the ‘micro-entrepreneurs’ of the ‘informal sector’ – while enabling a new round of enrichment, through parasitic and corrupt primitive accumulation, for the ruling elite. The extent of resultant social inequality is in many

cases vast and growing. The distinct form of impoverishment and deprivation produced by structural adjustment results in social exclusion and conditions of structural violence. Fanon foregrounded the spatially and racially compartmentalised condition of the colonial social order, describing the stark contrast between the clean, secure, spacious, well-built, and well functioning towns of the Europeans, and the dirty, chaotic, squalid, crowded towns and reserves of the Africans:

The settler's town is a strongly-built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly-lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage-cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about ... The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire.

(Fanon 1967: 30)

The incomplete process of decolonisation has not overthrown these inherited configurations, but on the contrary has tended to entrench them, while the racialised polarisation has become far more complicated in the neo-colonial context. The divide between wealth and poverty is no longer so easily defined by race, as the elites of African countries have accumulated vast wealth through parasitic accumulation in the neo-colonial period. The spatial configuration of the colonial social order described by Fanon is reproduced and further entrenched to new heights of luxury and new depths of exclusion today, more severely separated and contrasted in the 'gated communities' of African elites and ex-patriates alongside the extensive, rapidly growing slums and poorly-serviced, unplanned urban suburbs of towns and cities. These segregated living conditions are mirrored in all spheres of social life including transport: in the contrasted comfort of gleaming, air-conditioned four-wheel drives and the cramped, smelly, dirty and dangerous discomfort of *matatus* or *chapa-cem* (although both are vulnerable to car-jackings).

The recent, latest process of impoverishment in Africa, and the resultant urban growth and rural stagnation, must be historicised both in terms of specific legacies of the colonial social order and political economy, and in terms of the neo-colonial social order and the global political economy of structural adjustment. In Africa's historically specific context of political economy and social order, the process of urbanization

has been radically decoupled from industrialization, even from development *per se*. Some would argue that this is an expression of an inexorable trend: the inherent tendency of silicon capitalism to delink the growth of production from that of employment. But in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and parts of Asia, urbanization-without-growth is more obviously the legacy of a global political conjuncture – the debt crisis of the late 1970s and subsequent IMF-led restructuring of Third World economies in the 1980s – than an iron law of advancing technology

(Davis 2004: 9)

The growth of slums and urban poverty alongside deepening rural poverty has resulted from structural adjustment's liberalisation of markets and trade bringing

lower prices of crops and competition from cheaper agricultural imports, simultaneous with reduction or collapse of employment in manufacturing.

### ***Structural Violence in Kenya***

The condition of Kenyan society is characterised by the structural violence of neo-liberal-colonialism. Some indicators of this condition include the following. Kenya has been identified as one of the ten most unequal societies in the world, and the fifth most unequal society in Africa; while the three most unequal societies in the world are all in Africa – Sierra Leone, Central African Republic, and Swaziland (SID 2004: 7-8). Available data reveal that a major process of impoverishment has occurred over the past three decades, in particular in the decade of the 1990s. It was estimated that in 1974 the proportion of the population living in poverty was 29% (Collier and Lal 1980, cited in Manda *et al.* 2000: 14). Using conventional poverty-measurement techniques, Kimalu *et al.* estimated that in 2000 57% of Kenya's population lived in absolute poverty, a figure which had increased from 52% in 1997. They estimated that in 2000 51.48% of the total urban population lived in poverty, and 60% of the rural population (Kimalu *et al.* 2002: 30). According to UNDP data, in 2002 52% of the population had no access to improved sanitation, 38% had no access to improved water source, and 33% of the population were under-nourished. Life expectancy has fallen from 53 years in 1975 to 47 years at present (UNDP 2005) (UNICEF provide a figure of 44 years life expectancy at birth in 2003). UNICEF reports that:

- Previously declining infant and child mortality rates have risen
- Diarrhoea, respiratory infections, malnutrition and the rapid spread of malaria and HIV/AIDS are major contributors to young child deaths and illness
- The nutritional status of children under five years old has deteriorated. In 1995 it was estimated that 34 per cent of children were stunted and 25 per cent under weight
- Access to safe water and adequate sanitation has declined and ranges from 26 per cent in some rural areas to 44 per cent in squatter settlements
- Primary school gross enrolment has declined from 95 per cent in 1989 to 76 per cent in 1996

(<http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/kenya.html>)

Thus the authors of one report note that “the increase in poverty in the country is easily observed from the rising number of people without adequate food and nutrition, and with inadequate access to basic necessities such as education, safe water and sanitation, employment, health facilities and decent housing” (Manda *et al.* 2000: 16). The neo-liberal economic reforms and restructuring implemented by the Government since the early 1980s under direction from the World Bank, IMF and Western donor countries, included promoting the private sector, privatising parastatals, liberalising internal and external trade through removing price controls and import controls, and restructuring public services and social support systems. The goal of reducing the government budget deficit through so-called ‘cost recovery’ or ‘cost-sharing’ for basic social services of health and education had significant adverse effects on health and education. A recent study conducted by researchers from the Kenyan Ministry of Health, the World Health Organisation, and Health Action International, entitled *A Study of Medicine Prices in Kenya 2004*, found that around 20 million of Kenya's population of 30 million cannot afford medicines (Mwaniki 2005). The impact of

cost-sharing and cost-recovery was felt across the education sector, from increased drop-out from primary schooling<sup>6</sup>, lower enrolment rates at secondary level, through to university higher education: “some students attend public universities under conditions of abject poverty” (Manda et al. 2000: 39; see Mwinzi 2004).

Since the 1980s and especially during the 1990s these neo-liberal reforms led to a decrease in formal wage employment, while real wage levels have fallen significantly. There has been a very significant increase in the so-called ‘informal sector’ or *jua kali*, as a result of retrenchment under structural adjustment, made easier by changes in employment law imposed as a condition of multi-lateral lending. Many thousands have lost their jobs through restructuring of the civil service, parastatals and the private sector, and closure of many manufacturing firms as a result of market liberalisation, especially in the textiles and sugar sectors (Oiro et al. 2004: 8-9, Manda 2002: 16). In their place, foreign and Kenyan companies have set up in the Export Processing Zones, employing a largely female workforce in under-paid, precarious and flexible contracts which serve to deepen poverty (Kenya Human Rights Commission 2004). Outside small-scale agriculture, the proportion of the labour-market working in the informal sector has risen massively from 20 percent in 1988 to 70.4 percent in 2000 (Manda 2002: 15). While in neo-liberal circles a vibrant informal sector is celebrated as a site of budding micro-entrepreneurs, the reality is one of harsh survival: “The self-employed in this sector are individuals who operate survivalist businesses with very low rates of returns. Those employed in the informal sector receive earnings below minimum wage.” (Oiro et al. 2004: 8).

While poverty in Kenya and throughout Africa has been and remains a predominantly rural phenomenon – reflecting the enduring legacy of colonial rule – neo-liberal reforms have caused a significant increase in urban poverty and urbanisation. Of course rural and urban poverty are inherently linked, and the deepening rural impoverishment under structural adjustment exacerbates the migration to towns and cities and the growth of slums. In Kenya, furthermore, the growth of urban poverty in slums, as well as rural alienation, is inextricably linked with the specific, parasitic forms of corruption through which the ruling elite have accumulated wealth in the post-independence period. The illegal granting of land titles, rampant under Kenyatta and more especially Moi’s regimes (see Ndungu 2004), have multiple effects, driving rural populations out of the countryside and creating urban vulnerability to exploitative land-lords extracting rent from the urban poor who are paying to live on illegally settled land: “Evictions which are a consequence of land grabbing are a major cause of urban poverty.” (Apiyo 1998: 18). The slums themselves afford opportunities for parasitic accumulation. Most slums have arisen on public land which has been allocated to private owners through illegal and corrupt titles; these ‘slum-lords’, many of whom are politicians or civil servants, then charge rent to the inhabitants of the poor quality housing. The *Nairobi Situation Analysis* study revealed that “acquiring a slum property is one of the most lucrative investments in Kenya. The return on investment in a slum is under two years as compared to ten or fifteen years in the formal property market. Such vast profits are driven the by the absence of title deeds because land is often allocated informally to persons who become, in effect, structure owners and not real landlords.” (UN-HABITAT 2003: 3).

According to the *Nairobi Situation Analysis* carried out in 2001-2002, Nairobi’s slums occupy only around 5 % of the residential land area while housing more than 60 % of

Nairobi's population. These areas are characterised by very poor quality housing consisting of temporary constructions built of timber, plywood, iron-sheet, mud and wattle, plastic sheet and polythene bags. The slums are crowded, with families living in single rooms and an enormously high density of population, with more than 1000 inhabitants per hectare (Kusienya 2004: 1), compared with "typically 250 units per hectare compared to 25 in middle-income areas and 15 in high-income areas" (Otiso 2003: 226). In most slum and squatter settlement areas, infrastructure and services of roads, water supply, solid and liquid waste disposal, and surface drainage are non-existent. There is little or no sanitation, with open sewers and unregulated accumulation of litter. Pit latrines are shared by around 60 people or far more. Slum settlements tend to be on marginal land vulnerable to flooding and landslides (Otiso 2003).

The above statistics indicate powerfully the contours of Kenya's social crisis. Nevertheless statistics simultaneously sanitise the human condition through the process of abstraction –exemplars being the notions of 'poverty head-count' and 'poverty line'. Such abstractions are unable to convey the very concrete quality and experiential, lived nature of the condition to which they allude. A notion which better captures the dynamic, lived but also *caused* quality of poverty in Africa and elsewhere is that of *adjusted lives*, borrowed from the brilliant book by Nigerian writer F. Odun Balogun (Balogun 1995). This concept captures the fact that global restructuring, usually discussed in technocratic terms, enforces very direct changes in everyday conditions of living and survival for the majority in Kenya and the rest of Africa, with multiple personal and social ramifications.

The lived experience of the urban poor is one of permanent insecurity and lack, the structural violence of ill-health, hunger and malnutrition, cramped and dirty living conditions, lack of money, lack of work, and the constant danger of petty and violent crime. Such conditions have in some cases given rise to community-based organised resistance, explored further below; but they are as likely to lead to despair, crime, drug-use, alcoholism or prayer as to collective resistance and struggle for alternatives.<sup>7</sup> The structural violence of neo-liberal reform generates the inherent and routine, localised, individualised violence of adjusted lives.<sup>8</sup> The experience of the poor contrasts visibly in every respect with that of the local and expatriate elite: "income inequalities are wide and visible, which creates a sense of hopelessness, and the added poor and unstable economic conditions have challenged many would-be breadwinners. This state of hopelessness creates an atmosphere conducive to seeking refuge in alcohol, addictive substances and drugs" (Mugisha et al. 2003: 232).<sup>9</sup>

The daily struggles of the urban poor confront violence as a matter of routine. Many survival strategies or so-called 'income-generating activities' are illegal and dangerous, such as prostitution, illicit brewing and distilling, and unlicensed retail. The women selling vegetables on the pavements of Nairobi – street vendors or 'hawkers' – are regularly rounded up, bribed or beaten by the City Council *askaris*. The growing numbers of street children<sup>10</sup> suffer violence from all sides,

exposed to a myriad of problems because of their lifestyle and living conditions. They engage in sexual activity for reasons of survival or are outrightly abused by their peers or by other members of society. They live under the continual threat of violence. They are often in violent competition

with each other, or else suffer violence from the forces of law and order or from so-called 'mob justice'.

(Shorter and Onyancha 1999: 14).

Street children are exceptionally vulnerable to physical and sexual assault, and 'many take to drugs or sniffing glue to help them cope with the brutality of their lives' (Löw 1998).

Thus the lived condition of poverty and structural violence in the neo-liberal situation is characterised by daily struggles to survive, and such struggles routinely generate hopelessness, despair, crime, alcoholism and drug use. These are the individualised responses of adjusted lives.

### *A social movement of the urban poor?*

The deplorable social conditions in the slums have also generated a range of more organised responses, however. These range from the localised activities of numerous NGOs and 'grass-roots' organisations working in slum communities, and the formation of the *Muungano wa Wanavijiji Maskini*, the Federation of Urban Poor, to the Government's Slum Up-grading Programme which is being implemented in conjunction with UN-Habitat and funded by bilateral and multi-lateral donors. Many commentators, activists and NGO workers have celebrated the emergence of local organisations and networks of the urban poor and slum-dwellers<sup>11</sup>. These organisations have grown up in response to the particular problems faced by slum-dwellers, especially regarding evictions. The existence and activities of such local, community-based groups among the urban poor have been embraced and supported by more formal NGOs, both local and international, such as Pamoja Trust and Oxfam International. With this outside support, links have been established to groups elsewhere, for example in India and South Africa, all coordinated under the organisation Slum Dwellers International.

These organisations and activities undoubtedly constitute a significant form of local organisation and coordination, with a view to bringing improvement in social conditions, and they have been celebrated as demonstrating the agency and self-empowerment of the poor. However, such campaigns and movements must also be situated within the context of political struggle in society as a whole. To what extent do such struggles aim to influence or change broader structures in society? To what extent do such organisations seek consciously to establish links not just with other groups of urban poor, but with organisations of the rural poor in the countryside? What kind of understanding of the causes of poverty are held and espoused by these organisations? What kind of political consciousness is acquired or promoted by those involved in these organisations or movements?

There will clearly be no one answer to these broader questions, which cannot be answered without research. Nevertheless it is important to adopt a cautious and critical approach, which goes beyond automatically celebrating all forms of self-organisation and self-help among the poor and marginalised social classes. Some forms of self-help among the poor fit very neatly within the broader logic of neo-liberal reform, with its emphasis on cost-sharing and cost-recovery. In short, the

approach to 'poverty alleviation' most consistent with neo-liberal capitalism is to let the poor pay for their own poverty alleviation. Poverty is a problem for the ruling classes because of the potential for poverty and inequality to lead to overt and radical political struggle. Moreover the problems of poverty can disrupt social order, and generate crime and violence, all of which hinder the process of capital accumulation. In the logic of neo-liberal capitalism, then, poverty is a problem to be managed and contained, *in order to secure* the stability and reproduction of the status quo, the capitalist society and economy as a whole. Thus Raila Odinga, when signing the Memorandum of Understanding initiating the Slum Upgrading Programme, observed:

The existence of slums is of great concern to the Government as they accommodate a large proportion of the urban population who suffer the most deplorable and inhuman living conditions, *threatening the country's social and economic growth*

(Raila Odinga, cited by UN-HABITAT 2003, emphasis added)

Such concerns are very different from the objective interests of the poor, whose condition is *produced* by the very processes of capitalist accumulation which the ruling classes seek to secure. However, many of the NGOs and local organisations campaigning for slum improvement do not frame the problem and the struggle in such overtly political terms, nor seek a broader structural change of economy and society. The struggles tend to be more localised in extent and objective. The campaigns of local groups and urban NGOs such as *Kituo Cha Sheria* and *Muungano wa Wanvijiji* have succeeded in resisting slum demolitions and evictions, and have helped to raise the Government's awareness and the need for a more positive response to the problems of slums and informal settlements. There has been a shift in these organisations' strategy, from the earlier more oppositional stance towards the authoritarian government of the early 1990s to a more consensual approach from the late 1990s, emphasising working with the government in search of shared solutions (Weru 2004: 48-50). This new approach has been encouraged and directed by NGOs such as the Pamoja Trust, giving support, training and coordination to local groups and federations of slum dwellers. The work of coordinating, supporting and training slum organisations is in turn given support by international NGOs such as German international NGO MISEREOR, Oxfam, and the UK-based Ruben and Elizabeth Rausing Trust, as well as linking into broader networks via the organisation Slum Dwellers International, as noted above, which helps to coordinate visits and exchanges between countries (Weru 2004). A specific approach to slum improvements is encouraged, involving establishing partnerships between NGOs or the voluntary sector, the government, international donors, and the private sector. Two activities have become central to these groups, promoted in particular by outside organisations offering support. The first is the promotion of savings groups and the establishment of Funds to lend to slum-dwellers, to finance projects of housing and service construction and improvement; the second is local enumeration of slum dwellings and inhabitants, as a first step towards the process of slum-upgrading. It is argued that both activities, through the organisational activities entailed, serve to cement and consolidate bonds of cooperation and support among the communities of urban poor living in the slums (Weru 2004).

This strategy seems to be consistent with the broader neo-liberal social order, resting on commodification of all social relations and the privatisation and individualisation



of need satisfaction, leaving the state to secure and regulate conditions for capital accumulation. The operations of urban poor federations and NGOs have been recommended by or to international donors precisely for their self-help nature:

The savings groups are at the centre of these federations and all the initiatives they take; ... [The significance of these federations can be seen in] Their capacity to lower unit costs and mobilize local resources – so that external support goes further – and to recover costs for many initiatives, thus greatly reducing and sometimes even eliminating the need for external funding. ... There are obvious advantages to initiatives that keep down unit costs and that recover costs, because these make limited funding reach far more households. For all community-driven developments, it is important to minimize the gap between the cost of ‘significant improvements’ (whether through upgrading or new housing) and what poor people can afford.

(d’Cruz and Satterthwaite 2005: 2)

These NGOs and the solutions they promote do not seem to be part of a broader campaign against capitalism or neo-liberal restructuring. Rather, their approach appears to implicitly endorse the social relations and values of capitalist society. They endorse a strategy of cooperation with government, international donors and the private sector – the various ‘stake-holders’ of Africa’s alternatives. The organisation Slum Dwellers International receives funding from the Ford Foundation, and “has emerged as a player in global policy debates, attending international meetings convened by the United Nations and the World Bank” (Neuwirth 2005: 1). While these organisations promote self-help, ‘affordable’ solutions centred on loans and savings of the poor, and encourage further commodification of social relations under the banner of ‘income-generating activities’, they also serve to bolster the extension of the market through promoting market-based solutions to poverty. Thus the process of improving housing in Kenya’s slums has already attracted the attention of international capital. In June 2003 Raila Odinga signed on behalf of the Government of Kenya an agreement with an American government-owned finance corporation, Overseas Private Investment Corporation, which undertook to develop Kenya’s housing market and rural economy (Akumu and Nzioka 2004, STAT-USA 2004<sup>12</sup>). The lucrative opportunities are described by a market report issued by the U.S. Department of Commerce as follows:

As Kenya embarks on a housing development boom, the time is ripe for U.S. companies in the housing, construction, building materials and architectural sectors to make contacts with key industry players and identify partners to introduce appropriate U.S. products and services. Kenya’s housing sector is a best prospect particularly for manufacturers of affordable and durable building materials and proven low-cost building methodologies.

(STAT-USA 2004)

The NGO approach tackles technical problems of urban poverty, but leaves intact the social relations and economic structures which create both rural and urban poverty. While the growth of slums is at one level clearly evidence of a massive failure of urban planning, the causes of slums are not technical but arise from Kenya’s neo-colonial political economy and capitalist social relations. The *creation* and

*reproduction* of poverty, urban and rural alike, is related to the accumulation of wealth. Indeed, it would seem that the NGO approach is consistent with and part of a broader, international effort by Western governments and international financial institutions to heavily promote the role of the private sector in ‘development’ and ‘poverty reduction’. This would appear to accord with Paul Tiyambe Zeleza’s argument that:

out of the present struggles for democracy, or the ‘second independence’, which have been spawned by increased state authoritarianism and deepening poverty due to the economic crisis and the structural adjustment programmes, there is no guarantee that new, progressive regimes will be instituted. Indeed, democratization seems to be giving a whole new lease on life to regressive forms of development ideology. The ‘market’ is seen as a panacea of all economic ills. ... A democracy that is restricted to the political domain, as in western democratic regimes, while economic management is held captive to non-democratic principles of privatization, is an incomplete one.

(Zeleza 1997: 41)

## **Conclusion**

This paper has provided a preliminary exploration of conditions of possibility for political struggle for alternatives, in the context of Africa’s current neo-liberal condition. It is important to distinguish between strategies of survival, and strategies of political struggle to change society. There is a tendency, especially among western critical academics, to celebrate each and every instance of ‘resistance’ or the so-called ‘weapons of the weak’. Perhaps the encouragement of the empowerment of the urban poor through savings groups and micro-income generating projects is not very different. It might well be the case that the harsh conditions of impoverishment and oppression necessitate strategies of survival based on values of solidarity and co-operation, but in themselves these do not constitute a broader political consciousness and struggle aiming to achieve broader structural change. Moreover there is a profound difference between the cross-class or cross-group alliances and solidarity advocated by Gramsci, Fanon and Cabral, required in the collective political struggle to *transform* society; and the liberal policy of ‘stakeholder participation’, which presents the notion of a unity of interests between ‘the private sector’(including international as well as national capital) and the most oppressed and marginalised of society – the unemployed, street children, street vendors, ‘micro-entrepreneurs’, the ‘ultra-poor’.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.pips.at/huruma/francis/Francis\\_Thuo\\_Kiai.htm](http://www.pips.at/huruma/francis/Francis_Thuo_Kiai.htm).

<sup>2</sup> For critical theory in IR dealing with the question of emancipation, see Wyn Jones 2001, Neufeld 1995, Weber 2005. The literature on anti-globalisation struggles is enormous. For a useful collection see Eschle and Maignashca 2005.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Notes from Nowhere 2003, Amoore 2005, Appelbaum and Robinson 2005, Mertes 2003, Bandy and Smith 2004, Danaher and Marks 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Scott 1990; Hardt and Negri 2000. It is in the existing context of the widespread left embrace of resistance, agency and the 'weapons of the weak' that the work of Hardt and Negri has proved so popular, especially among supporters of and some participants in the 'global justice movement'. For a critique of Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, specifically with regard to their politics of spontaneity, see Brennan 2003; see also Brass 1993.

<sup>5</sup> See Sayer 1987, Sayer 1983, Ollman 1971, Ollman 1993 for discussion of the relational quality of Marx's thinking.

<sup>6</sup> "A consequence of this cost-sharing is that many children have dropped out of school. Although primary education in Kenya is supposed to be free and universal, the introduction of pre-payments and overhead expenses impose a serious financial burden on parents. Such payments include the cost of textbooks, uniform, writing materials, exercise books, activity fee, building fee and even Kleenex tissues. One of the respondents in our research claimed she had dropped out of school because she could not afford to buy the twelve required textbooks and a roll of tissue paper." (Shorter and Onyancha 1999: 21).

<sup>7</sup> On the rise in drug and alcohol abuse in Kenya see Johnston 2000, Mugisha *et al.* 2003, National Agency for the Campaign Against Drug Abuse (NACADA) 2004.

<sup>8</sup> See Gonzo and Plattner 2003's study of the 'street unemployed', or to use Kenyan slang, those condemned to 'tarmac', for a study of the psychologically despairing effect of unemployment in Africa.

<sup>9</sup> In a survey of university students at the public universities Moi University and University of Nairobi, Mwinzi found that the sale of illicit drugs and alcohol is one of various 'income-generating activities' conducted by students to make ends meet: "Focus group discussions indicated that most students prefer the illicit liquors to licit beer. The former is preferred because it is cheaper and the consumption of a small amount of it is enough to make one 'feel high'. ... *changaa* with up to 50 percent alcohol by volume was said to be the most commonly sold and consumed. Other illicit liquors were *muratina*, made from honey's sugar and *busaa* made from fermented flour. ... Focus group discussions also revealed that some community members in the neighbourhood of most campuses supplied these products to student partners to sell in the hostels. It was further reported that some students brew illicit alcoholic drinks in their hostel rooms both for consumption and for sale to fellow students" (2004:

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149). Further, 26.3 percent of the students interviewed in Mwinzi's survey admitted to being inattentive, fatigued or depressed. (ibid: 154).

<sup>10</sup> Löw (1998) reports that the estimated number of street children in Nairobi has risen from 16,000 in 1989, to 25,000 in 1993, to close to 60,000 in 1998. The number in 2005 is no doubt higher again.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Weru 2004, d'Cruz and Satterthwaite 2005.

<sup>12</sup> "The private sector is poised to play a significant role in the provision of housing as indicated in the National Housing Policy Draft. It is estimated that up to 80% of the middle income housing will be produced through private investors either individually or jointly between local and foreign investors. It is in this spirit that the U.S. government through the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) has signed two Memoranda of Understanding with the GOK through the Ministry of Roads, Public Works and Housing. The memoranda are expressions of mutual interest to support viable joint investment proposals by U.S and Kenyan companies in the housing sector. The two memoranda were signed in March and June 2003, respectively." STAT-USA 2004.