

Report on the Workshop: “After Socialism: Forgotten Legacies, Possible Futures in Africa and Beyond”

In October 13-14, 2017, the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies hosted the international workshop, “After Socialism: Forgotten Legacies, Possible Futures in Africa and Beyond.” The workshop was convened within the framework of the Academy’s Working Group 1, led by Nadine Siegert and Constantin Katsakioris, which studies the history of African socialisms and concentrates, in particular, on the period of crisis of the socialist projects and of the demise of the socialist camp (1989). One hundred years after the Russian Revolution, the workshop sought to examine how African radical parties, political actors, intellectuals, Eastern Bloc-educated students, writers and artists, who earlier had used the aesthetics of socialist realism, reacted to the crisis of socialism, to the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and to the dismantlement of the Soviet Union. Moreover, it sought to explore how these actors reinvented themselves, which ideologies, worldviews or visions of the future replaced the once powerful socialist visions, what the legacies of the African left have been, and how actors today recall their experience under socialist regimes or relate to socialism.

As the director of the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies, Achim von Oppen, stressed in his opening address, if the state-centered visions of the future of the era of African socialisms have attracted much scholarly attention, the crisis of these visions that came by the end of the 1970s and during the 1980s – although at different moments in different contexts – and the responses to this crisis, have largely remained unexplored.

Tanja Müller (University of Manchester) and Constantin Katsakioris (Bayreuth Academy) examined the trajectories of Eastern Bloc-educated students. Katsakioris provided data on returning African students from the Soviet Union and took issue at the well-known adage, sometimes attributed to President of Senegal Léopold Sédar Senghor, others to President of Ivory Coast Félix Houphouët-Boigny, “If you want to produce a Communist, send him to Paris;— if a Capitalist, send him to Moscow.” He argued that returning students were not as disillusioned as the Western press often depicted them. On the contrary, many of them remained “believers,” whereas others created alumni unions and societies of friendships with the USSR. Tanja Müller focused on the Mozambican students who had been educated at the School of Friendship (*Schule der Freundschaft*) in Stassfurt, East Germany. She argued that, against the metanarrative that portrays the GDR as a police-state and socialism as a failed project, Mozambican graduates have very positive memories of their formative years in the GDR even today and most of them still consider themselves as socialists.

Pascal Bianchini (University of Paris 7) and Alexander Stroh (University of Bayreuth) put their spotlight on leftist movements in Senegal and Burkina Faso respectively. Bianchini examined Senegalese leftism and the Parti africain de l’indépendance after the high ebb of Mai 1968 to show that, for all the setbacks and recurrent splits, the movement played a very important role in the process of democratization and in the struggle for civil rights and social justice in Senegal. Stroh also stressed the importance of Thomas Sankara as a symbol that still inspires the civil society movement in Burkina Faso, as evidenced by the “Balai citoyen.” However, after he carefully reconstituted the picture of electoral results during the last two decades, he demonstrated that radical Sankarist parties failed to elicit the support of Burkina Faso citizens, who voted for other parties, and attributed this failure to the citizens’ option for liberal institutions instead of radical politics. Didier Monciaud (Cahiers d’histoire) concentrated on the Egyptian student movement and argued the students supported and at the same time criticized the shortcomings of Gamal Abdel Nasser’s regime after the Egyptian defeat in the war of 1967.

The reinvention of radical politics by the Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK), was the subject of the paper presented by Joost Jongerden (Wageningen University). This was the only paper beyond Africa, but one that clearly showed how this former Marxist-Leninist party reinvented itself and opted for the political project of democratic confederalism. Embracing all working people, women, youth and national minorities, the Kurdish movement has become a radically democratic political force in the Middle East and beyond. Sa'eed Husaini (Oxford University) presented a paper on the current state of the Nigerian left and argued that Marxism and radical socialism still hold currency among trade unionists, youths, and activists.

Several participants put their spotlight on writers and artists. Adam Mayer (University of Hewler, Iraqi Kurdistan) analyzed the writings of the celebrated Nigerian writer Ifeoma Okoye and in particular her novel *The Fourth World*, in which Okoye reflected on the Nigerian social condition with a keen eye that had been attuned to the sensibilities of the formerly state-socialist Eastern Europe. Elara Bertho (CNRS France) surveyed the cultural policies of the socialist regime of Sékou Touré in Guinea Conakry. Using a vast array of published and unpublished sources, Bertho analyzed the critical or even satirical reactions of writers when the Guinean dictator passed away. Christopher Lee (Lafayette University) gave a paper on the South African communist activist and writer, Alex La Guma, whose novel, *A Soviet Journey*, is a tribute to the USSR. For all the novel's serious omissions, Lee argued that La Guma's writings are an integral part of the La Guma family's longer trajectory in the SACP and in the fight against the regime of apartheid, and reflect genius political beliefs and sympathy for the Soviet Union. Ksenia Robbe (Leiden University) retraced and mapped the critiques that have been voiced in South African cultural production since 2012, including literature, theatre, visual art, documentaries, curatorial projects and educational initiatives. She stressed that most of these critiques find symbolic resources in remembering practices of socialist activism from different periods since the early 20th century. Nadine Siegert linked the socialist realist aesthetics of the period of the national liberation struggle in Angola to the contemporary cultural production and demonstrated the fascinating transfigurations of socialism in contemporary Angolan art. Dores Cruz (Internationales Kolleg Morphomata) presented a paper on the socialist-era street names of Maputo. She argued that Maputo street names are part of a public iconographic landscape consistent with the socialist ideology that defined national identity in the aftermath of independence. She analyzed Maputo's urban space as a "text" that merges the past the streets commemorate, the ideology they materialize with ordinary settings of daily life and the capitalist goals of the 21st century Mozambican elite. Finally, David Ratner (University of Tel Aviv) presented the preliminary findings of his oral history project with protagonists of the Ethiopian student movement and with both proponents and opponents of the DERG regime.

The workshop participants used various case-studies and provided different insights and multiple perspectives. Throughout the debates it became clear how different the reactions to the crisis and demise of socialism have been between actors who experienced socialist regimes and others who militated against Western-oriented ones. To include the second "group" into the discussion, it appeared more useful to use the lens of "African left" instead of "post-socialism." Despite the different perspectives, most participants stressed the crucial historical input of the African left in the struggle for democratization, social development and human rights.

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