

Military Marxism: Africa's Contribution to Revolutionary Theory, 1957-2023

Adam Mayer

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Adam Mayer's "Military Marxism: Africa's Contribution to Revolutionary Theory (1957-2023)" offers a significant contribution to the intellectual history of African radicalism. This study calls into question a prevailing Western scholarly consensus that routinely marginalizes African Marxist experiments by labeling them as Soviet backed Marxism. Mayer has comprehensively addressed "Military Marxism" as a new paradigm and argued that this structure took shape in Africa in a unique way centered on military elements. While Marxism is a social, political, and economic theory that analyses society through the lens of class struggle, this study approaches it from a different perspective. The concept of "Military Marxism" was explored in depth by Adam Mayer, who analyzed the development and influence of African Marxist¹ thought on political and military movements across sub-Saharan Africa from the Cold War era through to contemporary times. The core of "Military Marxism" in Africa centers on the military's role as both an ideological and an organizational force in revolutionary and political change.

In this book, Mayer examines the influence and intellectual roots of African Marxist thought from the late 1950s to 2023. The book is organized into four main sections: a political history of Marxist triumphant leaders, an examination of its classical intellectual foundations, an analysis of the lost decades of the unipolar era (1987-2023), and a concluding synthesis of Military Marxist theory. The central thesis posits that African Marxism is a homegrown intellectual and political tradition that reached its peak between 1957 and the late 1980s. Mayer embodies a Marxism prepared to seize power, frequently enacted through the military

¹ African Marxism is an interpretation of classical Marxist thought adapted to Africa's historical, cultural, and post-colonial conditions. In African Marxism, the effects of European colonialism on Africa's economic structure are evaluated within the framework of imperialism. While classical Marxism is centered on the working class, tribal and clan structures come to the forefront through the agricultural production process in Africa.

functioning as a revolutionary vanguard. As an integral part of African socialist tradition, Military Marxism refers to a form of Marxism oriented toward seizing the state and exercising power. It emphasizes the necessity of a disciplined, organized army capable of resisting the collective imperialism of the West.

In the chapter titled “The Classics: Intellectual Roots of Militant and Military Marxism in Africa” analyzes how Marxist theory, armed struggle strategies, and revolutionary practices are intertwined through the ideas of Kwame Nkrumah, Walter Rodney, Amílcar Cabral, Samir Amin, Issa Shivji, Eduardo Mondlane, Thomas Sankara, Abdul Rahman Mohamed Babu, Dedan Kimathi, Dani Wadada Nabudere, Ernest Wamba Dia Wamba, and Ruth First.² The chapter titled “Africa’s Unipolar Era: Communist and Radical Thought in Africa’s Three Lost Decades and Beyond (1987-2023)” examines the period following the end of the Cold War, during which the visibility and institutional support of Marxist and radical thought in Africa declined. This period marks an era in which neoliberal policies, multinational institutions, and non-governmental organizations became increasingly influential, and it emphasizes how Marxist, communist, and radical political theory faced new challenges during this process. This title includes the stories of Issa Shivji, Sam Moyo, Mahmood Mamdani, Ali Mazrui, Thandika Mkandawire, Adebayo Olukoshi, Yash Tandon, Eboe Hutchful, Chinweizu, Tatah Mentan, Stephanie Urdang, Tajudeen Abdul-raheem, Bernard Magubane, Olufemi Taiwo, and Biko Agozino.³ Especially after the Cold War, external pressures such as neoliberal reforms have narrowed the institutional scope of Marxist thought.

Mayer traces the development of Military Marxism through African leaders. In Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara is known for implementing community-focused initiatives such as establishing schools and health facilities without relying on foreign aid. In Mozambique, the regime led by Samora Machel prioritized the development of communal villages. During the Agostinho Neto and then Jose Eduardo dos Santos eras in Angola, the regime strengthened state control over the oil and diamond sectors. Moreover, the activities of Western civil society organizations have been criticized. According to Sankara, since the 1980s, these organizations have functioned as “new missionaries”, offering superficial solutions to the social consequences of structural adjustment programs while also weakening state sovereignty. The so-called “civil society discourse” is described in the sources as an ideological tool of neoliberalism. It is presented as a mechanism aimed at removing the public from politics and reinforcing the established, often coercive activities of multinational corporations.

2 These figures are associated with African anti-colonial struggle, revolutionary thought, and radical Pan-Africanism. They were prominent actors, who contributed to critical analyses of colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism in Africa.

3 African intellectuals, scholars, activists, and revolutionary leaders are engaged in radical political economy, Pan-Africanism, and critiques of imperialism and capitalism. While some were participated in liberation struggles that included armed resistance, many were primarily known for their intellectual and theoretical contributions. Their roles often combined analytical critique with political practice, including engagement with both postcolonial state formations and revolutionary movements.

Mayer argues that military forces in Africa have historically served political purposes. Within a historical framework, military forces in Africa were employed by colonial⁴ administrations to suppress indigenous resistance and safeguard European interests. This situation led the army to develop into a structure that served external powers rather than the local population. After independence, the armed forces were used to suppress internal political problems rather than to protect the democratic order. The book discusses how the principle of civilian control over the military never took root strongly in Africa. Furthermore, while it is argued that military coups in Africa are not random but based on historical, structural, and political causes, a political culture has emerged that normalizes military interventions.

In conclusion, Marxism in Africa spread militarily under conditions of colonialism and state violence, diverging from traditional interpretations. In Africa, Marxism was implemented from the top down, by state elites and military cadres rather than through a grassroots workers' revolution, a process closely shaped by the continent's distinctive historical conditions and also used as a tool to struggle against colonialism. This indicates that Marxism emerged within the specific conditions of Africa. Mayer defines a distinctive form of Marxism that emerged in the African context, clearly differentiating it from classical, Western-centered Marxism. This approach reflects an understanding aimed at seizing the state and using the state's apparatus of power as a revolutionary tool. Marxism in Africa did not take shape through an industrialized working class, powerful trade unions, or parliamentary traditions. Instead, armed liberation struggles developed through military-based revolutionary elites and colonialism. In traditional Marxism, the army is seen as an instrument of the bourgeois state. According to "African Military Marxism", the army is at the center of the revolution. Mayer's fundamental aim is to reposition Africa not as an implementer of Marxist theory, but as its producer. This study may be analysed from a critical standpoint. The dense historical framework covering the period from 1957 to 2023, while highlighting the general trends within "African Marxism", risks failing to detail the heterogeneity of local contexts adequately. Furthermore, "African Marxism" can also be questioned regarding how ethnicity and religion intersect with revolutionary military movements, underscoring the importance of other actors beyond the emphasis on military actors. Ultimately, this book brings a new perspective to African literature.

4 Different forms of states and class relations have also emerged in Africa as a result of the impacts of colonization processes. For further reading see: Parris, S., and A. Van Rankin. 2024. *The Long Shadow of Structural Marxism in International Relations: Historicising Colonial Strategies in the Americas*. *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 21, 82: 41-57.