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Basil Davidson
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African Peasants and Revolution

by

Basil Davidson

The last thirteen years have seen important peasant uprisings in Angola, Guiné and Mozambique, conflicts which must be judged to some extent within the context of traditional colonial wars. Although the influence of events in neighbouring countries and urban notions of freedom and nationalism is undeniable, it is argued that these struggles reveal the rising trend of 'modern' resistance and its final dependence on mass participation by local communities conscious of their particular oppressions and fighting together to overcome them. The role of such revolutionary movements as the MPLA has been to organise and guide rebellions which would have occurred spontaneously if less successfully without them.

The African territories of Angola, Guiné and Mozambique[1] are today the scene of vast upheavals. These upheavals have arisen from the clash between an emergent African nationalism and an intransigent Portugese effort to destroy this nationalism or, failing that, to reduce it to a tamed reformism. The colonial wars thus engendered began in Angola during February 1961, in Guiné during January 1963, and in Mozambique during September 1964; and they have since continued on a rising if erratically realised scale of effort on either side. Though probably not yet at their peak, they are already the largest wars ever to have occurred in African history, not excepting the Algerian war of independence.[2] On the African side they entirely overshadow anything in terms of 'guerrilla warfare' witnessed in Latin America during these past ten years and more, and in those terms may be reasonably compared with the effort of the South Vietnamese Liberation Front, although this comparison is in many other respects inapplicable.

These wars must therefore be of close interest to everyone concerned with the history of Portugal on one side, and that of African nationalism on the other. But there are two persuasive reasons why they should also be of interest to everyone concerned with 'peasant questions'. Leaving aside their impact on the peasantry of Portugal, a desperately understudied subject, compared with which research into the African side is even abundant, the first of these reasons is that the vast majority of members of these African nationalist movements, and many of their best leaders, come directly from populations who are peasants in the sense defined by Shanin [1972: 28].[3] On any rational view of the matter, these struggles in 'Portuguese Africa' are peasant struggles.

Secondly, they are peasant struggles of what may perhaps be called an especially 'pure' type. For the most part they are being supported and they are being fought by peoples whose economic system is certainly no longer one of 'subsistence' in any complete sense of the term, but is just as surely nearer to one of subsistence than that of most other populations usually defined as being a peasantry. Here we find peoples whose economic and cultural self-sufficiency within sometimes very small geographical or kinship areas has quite often remained the central feature of their way of life and understanding of the world, whose literacy is nil or almost so, and whose use of modern technology, with everything that this implies, is much less advanced than what has long been generally found in Cuba, Vietnam, or Algeria. In the jargon of development studies, many of the populations who have fought off Portugal's armed forces with a continuous if uneven success, often a very costly success demanding a stubborn unity and will to suffer, are among the least 'developed' peoples of any region of the Third World today.

Yet these peasants have received a scanty or still inadequate attention from serious observers concerned to analyse their motivations and 'mechanics', and, in any case, only a small fraction of the study directed to far smaller and less enduring peasant struggles in, for example, Latin America. Whatever the reasons for this neglect, the time has surely come to embark at least upon preliminary inquiries into the nature of these peasant struggles in 'Portuguese Africa'. In the hope of stimulating a wider interest and a more secure analysis, this paper will touch on several dominant themes. Necessarily selective in their scope, these themes are three. They concern the historical context of these struggles, their nature, and their ideas and aims.

The Historical Context

The Portuguese have long been notable historians of themselves, at least until the general deterioration of scholarship under Salazar's régime had reached its middle point around the 1940's, since when the scene has become ever more desolate and deserted; and there is accordingly a large if unequally valuable historiography devoted to the Portuguese in Africa. Recent work in English by a number of historians has widened it.[4] In the Africans whom their governments have ruled and claimed to civilise, Portuguese historians may be said to have shown practically no interest at all, even to the extent of producing an Egerton or a Coupland. Save perhaps for the partial exception in the 19th century of Paiva Manso, who published the Kongo king Affonso's correspondence with Lisbon, the Africans have evidently remained for them a faceless mass of 'natives', a cultural zero, an historical nothing: indeed the present Prime Minister of Portugal, when a professor at Coimbra, emphatically declared in tones that matched his master's voice that the

Africans 'have invented nothing useful, discovered no profitable technology, conducted no conquest of value to the evolution of mankind' . . .' *[Caetano, 1954: 16]*. Again, others outside Portugal have lately begun to give serious thought to African history in 'Portuguese Africa', and now it is becoming possible to understand the past of the *indigenous populations* of these territories as well as their oversea intruders.[5]

The Portuguese side of the story, providing much of the historical context of the great uprisings of the 1960s, falls into three principal phases. The first of these covers a long period, beginning *after the middle* of the 15th century, when the Portuguese made trading contact along the seaboard of western and then of eastern Africa, and conducted occasional armed forays into the interior, eastward from what afterwards became the northern coast of Angola or westward up the course of the Zambesi. This 'palaeocolonial period' came to be chiefly concerned with the extraction of captives for use as slaves in Brazil; and its influence on the peoples of the interior was limited to the consequences of that enterprise, conducted mostly by African or part-African intermediaries working with Portuguese buyers along the seaboard, often to the accompaniment of Portuguese armed incursions.

A second phase opened with the Congress of Berlin (1884-5) and the effort to secure 'effective occupation' of colonial territories defined by notional frontiers on all the 'inland boundaries'. Military expeditions set forth from coastal or near-coastal bases, traversed the little known interior, clashed with armed resistance by various African peoples, established little forts at geographically useful places, and gradually advanced the claim that Portugal was 'in occupation' of these territories. For a long time the claim had little substance in reality, and only in the 1920s, whether in Angola, Guiné or Mozambique, was African sovereignty fully quenched.

There then opened a third phase of civilian administration (backed by the military whenever 'secondary resistance' took the form of large rebellions) which also saw the beginnings of a *mise en valeur* on a low level of investment and the gradual estalishment of an economic infrastructure, especially in the matter of road communications. The general principles of Portuguese colonial doctrine during this period were much the same as those of other colonial powers, though perhaps closer to Belgian principles than British or French. But Portuguese practice became in this respect increasingly eccentric after the installation of Salazar's *Estado Novo*, effectively in the 1920s, theoretically in the early 1930s. Reflecting Portugal's own situation, this eccentricity took the form of a systematic exaggeration of the practices of other powers. All of these supposed that African *colonies* should bring benefits to economic interests in the 'motherland' and thus, indirectly, to the state;[6] but Salazar's régime made the maximisation of such benefits into a cardinal aim of state policy for state advantage. And

where at home the Salazar régime cut down social spending in the interests of a positive balance of payments, its governors in Africa were ordered to do the same in their fiefs. All the colonial powers did this, and the period 'between the wars' was everywhere in colonial Africa one of social and cultural stagnation and also, if to varying extent, of stagnation in the *mise en valeur*. But this stagnation was probably far more complete in 'Portuguese Africa'.

It was nonetheless accompanied by erratic efforts at enlarging the extractive system. Again the Portuguese régime carried to excess what other powers practised more discreetly. All imposed forced labour in one form or other. But the more advanced powers increasingly imposed it, after the 1920s, by indirect means such as the imposition of poll-taxes which had to be paid in cash, and accordingly earned by working for whites: direct forms of forced labour sensibly diminished. But not in the Portuguese colonies: there the old internal slavery, formally abolished before 1900, gave way to a massive use of forced labour by a so-called 'contractual' system, the principle of the effective labour law being that Africans were not really 'working' so long as they worked for themselves, but were really 'working' only when they worked for wages and thus, overwhelmingly, for whites.[7] The rest of the system may be said to have closely reflected this crudity of exploitation, and was everywhere marked by the strictly authoritarian habits and approaches of the régime in Lisbon. Constitutionally, the populations were divided into two rigid categories, those of *assimilado* and *indigena*, the former being allowed the same civic rights and status, at least in theory, as metropolitan Portuguese, while the latter, being non-citizens, had no such rights and were subject to the full discrimination of the laws, notably those concerning labour and domicile. In any essential way the system was much the same in its effect, and often in its regulations, as that of Smutsian South Africa. Its guide-lines, interestingly enough in this context, were also pre-Salazarist in origin, being laid down by the last 'great' colonial governor of the pre-Salazarist period, Norton de Matos.[8] What the Salazarist régime did, during the 1930s and 1940s, was to transform these discriminatory principles into a rigidly racist system,[9] rather as the South African National Party, after 1948, systematised the discriminatory principles and practices of Smutsian South Africa into *apartheid*.

Such were the formative circumstances of the great uprisings. Other powers in Africa, after the second world war, had adapted their essential economic interests in their colonies to the policies of political withdrawal, and, at any rate after the early 1950s, had generally provided for the opening of a more or less large number of 'safety valves' in the 'structural containers' of African discontent and demand for change. In 1959 even the Belgians were brought to see the advantages of this policy. But Salazar and his spokesmen, including the present Prime Minister Marcello Caetano, would

accept *no such arguments* and perceived in them, as they often said, only the pathway to European disaster. How far they really thought this remains arguable, yet much of what they said then and since bears witness to a profound belief in their own mythology.[10] Behind this intransigence, *in any case*, lay the painful fact of Portugal's own economic weakness; whether they wished for it or not, the rulers of Portugal were in no position to embark upon a 'neo-colonial period' combining political withdrawal with continued economic hegemony. The latter, from any reformist perspective, would then simply pass to the United States, Britain and the leaders of the international system of which Portugal itself was *economically little more than a satellite.*[11]

This absence of any 'reformist option', so formative elsewhere in the development of African nationalism, has to be seen as a major factor in the turn to armed resistance, for what remained was only a choice between *war or continued surrender* at a time when peripheral territories — the Belgian Congo and Northern Rhodesia in the case of Angola, the French colonies of Senegal and Guinea in the case of Guiné, Tanganyika and Nyasaland in that of Mozambique — had gained or were about to gain their political independence. The leaders of the nationalists, at that time mostly 'townsmen and intellectuals', accepted the need for armed resistance with varying degrees of conviction and effectiveness. They were followed by the peasants, but again with varying degrees of support or participation: massively and explosively in a few cases such as the Kongo of northern Angola, where colonial abuses had long been felt *as severe (and where,* in the case of the Kongo, others of the same people had just witnessed the withdrawal of Belgian rule); scarcely at all in many cases; elsewhere again, with doubt and hesitation.

Why and for what reasons did this initially hesitant support among the peasants grow into a widening involvement, and why has it continuously spread to new populations?[12] Here one may attempt at least the sketch of an historical reconstruction as a basis for discussing some of the answers; and I propose to do this not in relation to 'highly colonised' peasant populations, whose reasons for resistance may be obvious enough, but mainly in relation to a *peasant people* who have been comparatively little touched, in the general course and structure of their daily lives, by the colonial occupation and its *mise en valeur.* Their case may be especially instructive, even if their strategic position is peripheral to the outcome of these wars, for *their case* can demonstrate in an unusually direct way the whole nexus of problems implied by transition from 'traditional values' to struggles within a modernising ideology and framework.

The example in question is that of the so-called 'Ganguela' language-group[13] who live mainly in the remote plains of eastern Angola. Linguistically in close relation to Lunda and other Bantu-

language peoples of Central Africa, this 'Ganguela' group has long
occupied its present region; according to the official census of 1960,
which I use here because it describes (approximately, at least)
the situation on the eve of struggles which have greatly altered
the population picture, they numbered 329,259 souls, making them
the fifth largest language group in Angola although it is also true
that their constituent languages differ considerably from each
other.[14] More particularly, the example is that of the Mbunda,[15]
whose exact number was not attempted by the 1960 Census but
may be of the order of 50,000. They may almost all be described
as peasants, and live in the central-southern area of the great
eastern District of Moxico, reaching from the Zambian frontier (here
the territory of the Lozi, or what the British called Barotseland)
for about one hundred and fifty miles to the westward. Their
country is relatively poor savannah and sparse woodland of the
soils that fringe upon the Kalahari sands, and their numbers, as
one may see, match this ecology. After 1965 these people joined
the Angolan resistance, and became one of its effective pillars in
the east.

Early descriptions of the Mbunda are few and hard to find, like
their hamlets, and a later anthropology has had almost nothing to
say about them. Silva Pôrto offers a few swift glimpses in his
notebooks of the 1850s and after[16], but Arnott and Serpa Pinto,
who traversed their country in the 1880s, add almost nothing. Not
until 1918, with Ferreira Diniz [1918],[17] does one come upon any
real attempt to describe the Mbunda and their neighbours. This
leaves much to be desired. The 'Ganguela' as a whole, he says,
have 'federations' consisting of small nuclei 'linked by family ties,
but more or less independent of one another'. Each nucleus has
its chief assisted by a council of elders who take decisions by
majority rule. 'These small states, if one may call them such, are
subordinate to the chief of the tribe, to whom major questions are
taken for hearing and judgment by the councillors, upon which
occasions, these being important moments of great interest to
the tribe (such as declarations of war and succession questions),
there assemble all the chiefs of the *libatas* [nuclei] and their kin,
the decisions again being taken by majority. . . .'

The chief of the Mbunda, Diniz continues, is *Mwene* Bando 'who
has exercised this function for about twenty years' — since, that
is, some years before 1900 — 'and is one of the few tribal author-
ities to have conserved power and prestige among his subordinates.
His residence is along the banks of the Luati. . . .'[18] In that
period, then, before any effective Portuguese occupation of this
region save for a handful of forts established by Joao de Almeida
in 1909 and garrisoned by a few soldiers, black as well as white,
the Mbunda were organised politically in a manner familiar to many
regions of Africa. Sparse occupants of a large if little fruitful land,
their 'nationalism' was that of a cultural identity and a minimal

political loyalty to chiefs whose secular power, in so far as they had any, derived from the 'charters' of ancestral tradition.[19] In other words, they lived in the general pattern which had enabled the peopling of these *solitudes during an Iron Age* which began, here in eastern Angola, around the middle of the first millenium A.D. Based on a system of beliefs about mankind and his environment, itself the product of this people's survival and development, the 'charter' of the Mbunda had evolved to give them the 'community cement' they needed, and to provide both for explanation of the world they knew and prescription of the way that they should live in it.

Mwene Bando was their last independent king or paramount. Exactly when he was overthrown, and in what manner, and to what extent the Mbunda were then 'colonised', is anything but clear in the secondary sources, while the primary sources in Lisbon and colonial archives have yet to be explored or, indeed, opened for exploration. Yet one may note that Galvao, writing much later in 1931, notes of this area that 'our influence, Portuguese occupation and territorial organisation, are incomparably less intense and perfected than they were after the action of Almeida' in establishing forts as far as Mucusso, in 1909.[20] Clearly the Mbunda and their neighbours were anything but completely 'pacified' even at the outset of the 1930s. But the 1920s appear to have brought the small beginnings of *colonisation in Moxico*, as in Cuando Cubango to the south and Lunda to the north, and it would seem that the 1930s carried the process further by establishing a direct political control through Portuguese administrators and such coercive force as they could bring to bear. The means were small, but were used with a determination characteristic of the Portuguese.

If 'pacification' was more or less achieved by the mid-30s, it was little exploited. These eastern lands were poor. They offered little in the way of exportable produce, and few Portuguese cared to come and settle here if they could possibly live somewhere else. Administrative centres were 'towns' of the 'third class' or the 'fourth class', handfuls of huts and sheds, remote, forgotten, abandoned to their isolation. The Mbunda and their neighbours appear to have felt the 'colonising process' in little more than demands for free labour and in whatever taxes could be raised from any of their economic activities. The 1960 census says much about their situation when it speaks of religious affiliation. For the whole Angolan population, put at 4,830,449, Catholics were numbered at 2,454,401 and Protestants at 800,091, so that far more than half the population was claimed as Christian. But for the Circumscriçao dos Bundas (Mbunda), only 2,096 Catholics and 3,521 Protestants were claimed in a total population of 49,805, or little more than a tenth for both Christian denominations. The number of whites was exactly sixty-three. Thus the Mbunda adhered to the appeal of militant nationalism while standing in

the 'colonial spectrum' at a far extreme from other peoples, such
as the Kimbundu and Kongo, whose experience of the 'colonising
process' had long been intense in every aspect of their lives.

Living briefly among the Mbunda in 1970, one had the impres-
sion that much had changed because of the war, but little in the
basic characteristics of their organisation. Hostilities had driven
many of them into refuge in Zambia. Others had abandoned their
riverside hamlets, placed traditionally along the woodland edge of
wide channels of grassland through which their rivers flow in all
seasons, chill and clear and rich in fish. These others had retreated
into the woods where they had built new villages in areas where
their guerrilla fighters could protect them from Portuguese raids,
or else, when such protection was difficult or uncertain, they were
now living in flimsy camps of brief duration, cultivating fields of
millet or other crops in woodland clearings and returning whenever
they could to fish their rivers. Colonial rule had long since
dismantled their 'federalist' structure, and their ethnic authority —
as distinct from the new and modernising authority that springs
from the nationalist movement — was evidently limited to 'nucleus
elders'. Otherwise, discounting for a moment the profoundly
dislocating consequences of the war upon daily habits and food
supplies, their pattern of life looked very much the same as Diniz
described half a century earlier when *Mwene* Bando ruled. And
this impression was deepened by the presence of shrines and other
objects of divination or appeal to spiritual powers, it being gen-
erally held, by all those whom I was able to consult on such a
point (in the circumstances, admittedly, an often interrupted effort
at research), that all this was much the same 'as it used to be'.

All this remains unsatisfactorily vague. There is simply no way,
for example, of knowing how many Mbunda are still living in
eastern Angola, and how many have fled to Zambia, since by no
means all of the latter are prepared to register as refugees and
thereby find themselves in refugee camps; many Mbunda near
the border, on the contrary, move back and forth according to the
fortunes of the war in these parts. Nor is there any reliable way
of knowing how many Mbunda have been rounded up by the
Portuguese army and driven into *senzalas de paz* ('peace villages')
or other wire-encircled and garrisoned encampments of that kind;
or how many remain under guerrilla protection in the woodlands
round the Shekului, Luati and other rivers. What may be stated
with confidence is that the Mbunda adhered to the nationalist
movement and resistance, after 1965, in a number that was suffi-
cient to enable this movement to count on their region as one
of its chief bases in the east. This is not the place to discuss
the effectiveness of this adherence in terms of advancing the
nationalist cause, a quality which depends on many contingent
factors such as porterage, food supply, and the intensity of Port-
uguese ground raids and aerial bombing or defoliation, as well as

the general pattern of nationalist plans and effectiveness. [See *Davidson 1972* for extended discussion.] Effectiveness is not the point here: what signifies in this context is that this people, or a large part of them, wished to join the nationalist movement, and did so.

In the historical context, then, the revolt of the Mbunda beginning in the second half of the 1960s may be interpreted in several different ways. It may be considered as another if major act of resistance within the traditional framework of anti-colonial peasant struggle: as one more attempt, like others before it, to restore the 'right and proper way of life' by restoring the rule of the ancestors and their spokesmen here on earth, as well as to free the Mbunda from colonial exactions of one kind or another. For many Mbunda, supporters of the nationalist movement as distinct from participants, this is probably a correct interpretation: for them, after all, the concepts of nationalism, let alone the whole range of ideas concerned with far-reaching social change, must remain extremely remote. Their pre-colonial development had enabled them to populate an unusually difficult country, and, by the use of crop cultivation, canoe building, iron working and hunting, to secure an adequate standard of living for a total population of very slow growth while achieving that tolerant kind of relationship with their world and their neighbours that Silva Pôrto sketches in his notebooks of a century ago, a relationship which the visitor of today can still trace, or believe that he can trace, even under the ferociously disturbing conditions of colonial war. What is needed for a good life, by Mbunda concepts, may be little more than a revival of a vividly remembered past before the arrival of Portuguese troops and tax-collectors. Let us call this 'the traditionalist aim'. It has certainly played its part.

Yet Mbunda involvement and participation can be viewed, and to a quite a large extent even must be viewed, in other ways as well. These appear from a consideration of the nature of the struggle.

The Nature of the Struggle

The Angolan uprising began in 1961 in the far west and far north of the country, and in complex circumstances. [See *Marcum, 1969* and *Davidson, 1972.*] It spread, or could be spread, to the eastern districts only in 1965: only, that is, after its heralds were able to count on the friendship of Zambia, which ceased to be the colony and protectorate of Northern Rhodesia in October 1964. The Mbunda, by all the evidence, began in the latter part of 1965 to hear at firsthand about what they must have long heard by rumour, and their early attacks on Portuguese objectives began soon after that. These were conducted very much within the 'traditionalist framework' of ideas and values, with arrows rather than with bullets, and with charms for protection against the

white man's rifle fire; in so far as there was any nationalist leadership it appears to have been merely adventurist, and its influence on the Mbunda failed when promised rifles were not delivered. In all these respects this early Mbunda uprising in 1966 was much of the same type as that with which the Pende of the Congo had responded to Mulele's call a year or two earlier [see *Verhaegen, 1967*], or, at least in essence, as that with which the Kongo peasants had responded to the agents of Robert Holden in 1961. It was, in short, a response which had in it elements both modernising and traditional, but the latter heavily prevailed. Perfectly unshaken by these early attacks, which they easily dispersed, the Portuguese could now have ceased to worry about the Mbunda had not another factor intervened. This was the arrival on the scene of the spokesmen of a nationalist movement, the MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertaçao de Angola)[21], which proved to have the capacity to reverse the balance, and to embrace the Mbunda in a movement of resistance that was still both modernising and traditional, but in which the modernising elements were increasingly to have the upper hand. Under this new leadership, whether of rural or urban formation and equipped now with at least some supply of MPLA small-arms, the Mbunda rallied and began again. With varying fortunes they have since continued against a stiffening Portuguese military effort to destroy them. By 1970, at least, they had gone far towards transforming their resistance from the old type to a new type, abandoning much of their faith in charms and spells (at least in the matter of bullet-proofing), and gradually, if with many false starts and setbacks, to see themselves as component parts in the realisation of a programme of *national* unity and change such as they had not conceived before.

Here we reach, undoubtedly, the central achievement of the MPLA and its companion movements in Guiné and Mozambique. Rejecting any mere reform of existing structures and institutions — at first because they were offered no opportunity for their taking part in such reforms, afterwards because they became convinced that no such reforms could yield national unity and change — these leaders have led their supporters and participants in a major effort towards the building of new structures and institutions. Politically, this has meant the promotion of representative committees for single communities or groups of adjacent communities; socially, the widening and intensification of participation in activities and decisions concerned with local self-rule and elementary social services and with the production of food, as well as with other activities concerned with the support of their fighting units; and, culturally, the provision for at least the beginnings of a modernising education, starting out with a campaign against illiteracy. Little by little, as the wars continue, at least the outline of a new society begins to take shape.

How far has this modernising process gone? Here, admittedly,

one stands on difficult ground, for these are struggles that are still in mid-course of their development, and objective judgments on their meaning and effectiveness, on their maturity, are necessarily hard to make. Yet the evidence for an objective answer is now of many kinds, and at least a start can be made towards the conclusions that history will reveal. These struggles in the Portuguese colonies are successful guerrilla-type wars. To begin with, therefore, one needs to arrive at a general understanding of what success means in this context, and all the more because so much misconception and even nonsense has been wafted round the scene by amateur enthusiasts or would-be 'Guevaristas'. It must probably be emphasised, even at this late point in time, that a successful guerrilla-type resistance can never stem from military adventure, however motivated, but only from the political exploitation of a general situation which is felt by a mass of people to be hatefully and obviously unjust to them. 'Big words' about freedom and independence can achieve nothing if the 'little words' about local oppression are not persuasive. Secondly, this political exploitation will still fail unless it can pass from the mobilisation of mass support to the mobilisation of mass participation. It is one thing to want change and quite another to fight for it, but sympathy is not enough. Without a steady stream of new volunteers the most courageous band of 'initiators' will soon find themselves in isolation and defeat.

Thirdly, this move from support to participation will not take place unless the right arguments are found, while the finding of these depends not on any general understanding of the situation or 'analysis of history', but on the most intimate knowledge of local habits, languages, hopes and fears. There can be no question, à la Debray or Fanon, of 'carrying the revolt from the towns to the countryside' by mere optimism or exhortation. Peasants are not optimistic people, and they will not be persuaded by those who do not closely understand them and share their lives: in the beginning, at any rate, by those who do not come from their own ranks. Fourthly, and in step with the development of the *resultant* political and military struggle (the two becoming inseparable), the organisation of this type of modernising peasant movement must be such that the fact and influence of mass participation becomes, and remains, a dominant and manifest factor in the whole process. The peasants want to be sure they are fighting for themselves; only then will they become willing to fight for their neighbours as well. Fifthly, and following from this, the growth of mass participation must never be allowed to rob the new vanguard of its leading rôle: otherwise their leaders will move in one direction while the peasants go off in another.

It would be possible on the evidence available to draw other conclusions from the record of these movements (PAIGC in Guiné; FRELIMO in Mozambique; MPLA in Angola), and to test all these

conclusions against their relative success, or against the relative failure of other movements conducted in another way. Even the limited record of the Mbunda and the MPLA shows how sharply the conflict between the traditionalist and modernising elements in their movement can strike and chafe against each other, while the comparable movements in other territories have often shown the same tension or open strife. One important implication of these rules, for example, is that the pace and progress of military operations, whether in intensity, weaponry, or type of objective, must not outstrip the capacity of mass participation to absorb and understand them, for, if it does, this will lead to 'overheating' just as surely as military *attentisme* will lead to disbandment. Another implication is that the structure of the movement must be constantly reviewed and overhauled so that the inner mediation of power remains an interplay between leaders and led. One could add other rules, but these five and their implications are of an iron necessity. They must be met substantially, or the end will be disaster.

But if they are met, as all three major movements in 'Portuguese Africa' have each met them in the measure of their political and military success, then the struggle can acquire a meaning and momentum of its own, and can lead continually and consciously towards original solutions capable of solving what existing attitudes and structures, whether colonial or traditional, cannot solve. There takes place what Amilcar Cabral, in one of his memorable passages has called 'a forced march on the road to cultural progress' *[1969a]*[22], and here he is using 'cultural' in the widest sense, and above all in the sense of a developing socio-political consciousness on the part of individuals who, developing together in this way, come to form a new community, begin to shape a new society. Thus:

> the leaders of the liberation movement, drawn generally from the 'petty-bourgeoisie' (intellectuals, clerks) or the urban working classes (workers, chauffeurs, wage-earners in general) have to live day by day with the various peasant groups in the heart of rural populations, and they come to know the people better. They discover at the grass-roots the richness of these peasant cultural values (philosophical, political, artistic, social, moral). They acquire a closer understanding of economic realities. . . .
>
> Not without a certain astonishment, the leaders realise the richness of spirit, the capacity for reasoned discussion and clear exposition of ideas, the facility for understanding and assimilating concepts, by population groups who yesterday were forgotten, if not despised, and who were considered helpless by the colonisers and even by some nationalists. The leaders thus enrich their culture. They develop personally. They free themselves from complexes. They reinforce their capacity to serve the movement in the service of the people.
>
> On their side, the working masses and in particular the peasants, who are usually illiterate and have never moved beyond the boundaries of their village or their region, come into contact with other groups and lose those complexes of their own that constricted them in their

relationships with other ethnic and social groups. They realise their crucial rôle in the struggle. They break the bonds of the village universe. They integrate progressively into their country and the world. They acquire an infinite amount of new knowledge that is useful for their immediate and future activity within the framework of the struggle. They strengthen their political understanding by assimilating the principles of national and social revolution postulated by the struggle. They thereby become more able to play the decisive rôle of providing the principal force behind the liberation movement. . . .

The struggle brings other profound modifications in the life of the population. The armed liberation struggle implies, therefore, a veritable forced march along the road to cultural progress [ibid.].

The evidence so far to hand suggests that the most successful of these movements have by this time advanced far along this line of march. None of them has done so without serious set-backs, internal failures, grave betrayals, numerous mistakes, not so numerous but still serious blunders, and several severe defeats.[23] Yet the march has everywhere continued, partly by the spur of its own momentum and success, a great deal because of effective leadership, and to no small extent because of the sheer intransigence of the colonial power. A full review of these wars would show that the Portuguese commanders have at last begun to understand the force of at least this third element, so that the recent period has produced the strange spectacle of a most orthodoxly authoritarian commander, General António Spínola in his embattled colonial capital of Bissau (Guiné), advancing the claims of a Portuguese 'social counter-revolution' which in his view is to cut the ground from under the feet of the nationalists.[24] For some time now there has been much talk of Portuguese concessions and the reform of 'what exists'; but the situation that has now evolved in nationalist-held areas is such that no conceivable reform of 'what exists', when compared with the new structures and institutions of self-rule taking shape there, could be more than a return to the colonial past.

This is true in obviously varying degrees of maturity and effectiveness. New structures and institutions come to life with great difficulty, and can be kept alive only by the most devoted effort in nationalist areas subject to frequent Portuguese raids and counteraction. This has been the case with the homeland of the Mbunda, repeatedly swept by Portuguese incursions of helicoptered troops combined with large units sent from strong garrisons to the westward. Elsewhere, in areas which the Portuguese army has long found it hard or impossible to over-run, or even to reach except at rare intervals, the outlines of a new society are already very clear. Another illustration from my own observation, that of the Balante and their neighbours of southern Guiné, offers a case in point. These peasants are much more numerous than the Mbunda and may total about 250,000. Traditionally, they are in most respects a characteristic 'stateless society' of West Africa, being

organised in a segmentary structure whose details have yet to be scientifically assessed but whose general pattern is not in doubt. Their situation at the outset of the war was somewhat the same as that of the Mbunda in that they were subject to 'minimal administration' or, from another if subjective angle, a more or less total 'colonial neglect'. Direct Portuguese rule had been installed in the 1920s, though not easily, since when the tasks of administration were concentrated in collecting taxes and protecting the commercial monopoly of local Portuguese traders. Portuguese-nominated 'chiefs' were appointed and seem generally to have had the same ineffectual status as British-appointed 'warrant chiefs' among the 'stateless peoples' of, for example, Eastern Nigeria. These men played the rôle of colonial agents or messengers, while the traditional structure of the Balante carried on much as before.

The Balante embraced the cause of anti-colonial struggle from the first, and have provided the nationalist movement (PAIGC) with its principal ethnic support. Like the Mbunda, they began by responding to 'small words' about local injustice, and have gone on to embrace the ideas behind 'big words' about liberation and independence. They responded, in other words, to the prospect of relatively minor gains of a generally reformist nature, but, with the development of their participation in the nationalist movement, they have since embraced the institutions of a new society. This is what they claim, and their claim reflects a patent truth. Consider, for example, the situation that one could examine during 1972 in one of the areas of southern Guiné that have long been freed from Portuguese control. This particular area consists of the sector of Como, a small group of 'islands' divided from the main by narrow creeks and waterways. The Portuguese had garrisoned these islands until 1964 but were then driven out; the whole sector was cleared of Portuguese troops in 1965, and these had not been able to return. By the end of 1972, in other words, the people here (Balante and neighbouring groups) had ruled themselves without Portuguese intervention for rather more than seven years.

Like others, the peasants of the Como sector are protected from Portuguese raids by local units of the full time army of the PAIGC[25], and partly by a militia of local men under PAIGC command; the latter also provide, in so far as it is needed, a local police force. Nearly all of the men of both forces are peasants, with many of local origin, and so are most of their commanders, the exceptions being a few of those 'petty bourgeois' elements from Guiné towns to whom Cabral referred in the passage quoted above. Their tasks and their behaviour are the subject of consultation between the senior local PAIGC command (consisting of a full time military commander and a full time political commissar, both of peasant origin) and the elected sector committee. This committee, also all of local origin, derives its representative character from fifteen elected village committees, some representing

a single village, others a group of adjacent hamlets. These com-
mittees have a range of responsibilities which has continuously
widened with the improvement of their representative character
and the development of the struggle as a whole. They have
become responsible for the supply and supervision of local schools,
clinics and other welfare institutions, none of which had existed
here before the coming of the national movement; and they carry
out these responsibilities in what is evidently a close cooperation
with the full time workers of the movement, most of whom, of
course, are also of peasant origin. During 1972 they added to
these responsibilities with the creation (as elsewhere in liberated
Guiné) of village tribunals composed of selected committee-
members within an overall framework controlled by the PAIGC.

So it appeared to a visitor, in Como in 1972, that nothing hap-
pened or could happen, save for accidents or defaults of duty,
without the active participation of its local people, and this was
true even down to the organisation of canoe-transport for crossing
creeks or to the handing out of permits to visit relatives in towns
on the mainland that are still garrisoned by the Portuguese; the
largest of these, Catio, is only a 'tide's distance' away by double-
paddled canoe. Here one sees in vivid everyday detail the difference
between support and participation, and the many ways in which
these peasants, through active involvement, have begun to change
not only their social structure but also, and much more, their ideas
about the present and the future. They are a remote population,
utterly 'forgotten, if not despised' in colonial times, and they have
lived very much to themselves. Yet it seemed very obvious, in
1972, that they were well aware of being a part of a wider struggle
as well as of a battle for themselves.

In 1972, moreover, these peasants took part in a general election
for a National Assembly of Guiné and, after direct and secret
ballot in their villages, sent elected members to a regional assembly
for Como and two neighbouring sectors (Cubucaré and Tombali),
which, with fourteen other regional assemblies, in turn chose
national representatives. Promoted in all the liberated areas, this
general election was seen by the PAIGC as providing a democratic
basis for an Assembly which would declare the country's inde-
pendence, and as initiating a constitutional separation of powers
between state and party; but it was also seen, undoubtedly, as
another means of widening and intensifying mass participation,
and it was so discussed, repeatedly together with its other aims,
at electoral meetings. One of the PAIGC leaders who spoke at
these meetings used an explanatory phrase in Guiné Criole, more
or less a *lingua franca* here, which seemed to me to strike an
always dominant note: *Povo na manda na su cabeça*, 'People have
to do it for themselves'. As support moves into participation, and
participation into deeper understanding and involvement, so does
the content of the struggle acquire its profoundly educational and

liberating rôle.

So, too, does the ground for reformism narrow and disappear, and the realities of structural change then begin to crystallise, whether in relation to 'traditionalist' or imposed ideas and beliefs and institutions. That is why these peasant movements have to be seen, along the spectrum of nationalist development, as movements of a new type, of a post-reformist type, of a revolutionary type that is very distinct from the nationalism of the 1950s and early 1960s elsewhere in Africa. That is why Cabral, in the perspective of these struggles, defined 'the phenomenon of national liberation' as being 'necessarily one of revolution' *[1969b: 83; Davidson, 1969a: 77].*[26]

Ideas and Aims

Most of the leaders of these movements would describe them, I think, as vanguards of a national unification still to be made complete within national frontiers. The primary task is to promote this unity to a point where colonial rule can be destroyed. But this involves another task which is integral with the first: the promotion of a necessary unity by means that go necessarily towards the building of a social system which is politically and culturally new, and can derive in no essential sense from the mere reform of 'what exists'. This second task is integral with the first because the first, the mere removal of colonial rule, proves impossible without the second, and the second imposes its own dynamic in ways which the initiative of the Balante, for example, dramatically show. Hence these vanguards can be defined as movements of *revolutionary nationalism*. They accept the nationalist framework because it is as much a given condition as the fact of colonial rule. But they reject its colonial content, and this, by logical extension, means that they also reject its reformist potential. They look to a future when self-identity will be able, within post-capitalist structures, to pass beyond the limits of reformist nationalism.

Their leaders have offered definitions at various times. 'We are trying,' observed the MPLA leader, Agostinho Neto, in 1970, 'to free and modernise our people by a dual revolution — against their traditional structures which can no longer serve them, and against colonial rule' *[quoted in Davidson, 1972: 279].* Or Cabral, in 1966 (in his Havana address), expressing the same developmental (hence, in these circumstances, revolutionary) theme: 'For us, the basis of national liberation, whatever the formulas adopted on the level of international law, is the inalienable right of every people to have its own history, and the objective of national liberation is to regain this right usurped by imperialism: that is to say, to free the process of development of the national productive forces'. Expressed in other statements and often in conversation, Cabral's view was that the pre-colonial development of Africans, stopped or distorted by colonial conquest and control, must now

be made to begin again; that this involves the kind of 'dual revolu-
tion' defined by Neto; and that, this being so, 'the principal aspect
of national liberation struggle is the struggle against neo-colonial-
ism': against, that is, the reformism which would prolong or merely
modify existing structures of stagnation or, at best, of 'growth
without development'. He further held that if this struggle could
be won, then conflicts of inter-national rivalry or strife in Africa
could be resolved as surely as revolutionary nationalism could also
resolve, even was already resolving, intra-national conflicts of 'tribal'
or other sectoral rivalries.[27]

If one goes on to ask how far such ideas and aims may be
shared by the peasants who form the vast majority of the member-
ship of these vanguard movements, or even understood by them,
one is returned directly to the consequences of participation as
distinct from sympathy or support. So long as one avoids any
'voluntarist' implication,[28] there is a sense here in which it appears
true, as Sartre has remarked in quite another context, that 'the
real locus of revolutionary consciousness is neither in the immed-
iate class, nor in the party, but in the struggle'.[29] For the peasants
here were slow to move and possessed at the beginning nothing
that remotely resembled a 'revolutionary consciousness', while 'the
party', on the other hand, likewise began with aims that were often
confused, sometimes merely reformist, or else distant from those
practical realities of the 'here and now' in which a revolutionary
consciousness can take effective shape. But that was ten years
ago and more; and in the interval the dialectics of political participa-
tion, constantly opposing new ideas to old ideas, new aims to old
aims, and repeatedly pushing past the mental barriers of the past,
have had their full effect. The handfuls of 'petty bourgeois' who
launched these struggles have long since found the company of
countless peasant participants who have also long become, at one
level or another, in one capacity or another, leaders of their move-
ments. Some have fallen by the wayside, others have pulled back
into neutrality or gone over into hostility, and many have been
killed in warfare with the Portuguese. Yet the balance of the
evidence suggests that these movements have continued to grow
in their internal solidarity as well as in their strength of numbers,
and nothing in the evidence suggests this more clearly than the
nature of the defections they have suffered, or the action taken to
overcome these defections.[30]

One can approach the question of 'understanding' from another
useful angle: from that of the ways in which the problem of the
mediation of internal power has been handled. Few problems have
been harder for these leaderships to solve; even today, few remain
as hard, especially in countries as vast as Angola or Mozambique,
where the facts of geography and inter-communication pile huge
difficulties on top of the frailties of human nature. Initially substitu-
tionist because they could be nothing else, 'nationalists without a

nation', the leaderships proclaimed the nation and set about realising it. Their records show how arduous and difficult they found it, and how large the difficulty still remains; they also show how seriously it has been tackled.

The central task, as they have seen it, or at least as their clearest heads have seen it, was to displace 'substitution' by 'participation'. Given the complexity of the problem, greatly increased by an illiteracy rate of ninety to one hundred per cent and the consequent absence of any reading habits, as well as by the subtle and continuous interplay or conflict of individual motivations with collective aims, the task is obviously still there and, indeed, can never be fulfilled in a final sense. But the general measure of their present success in solving this problem of the mediation of power, in making this necessary displacement, is given by these movements' survival and expansion. Only an increasing participation in thought and action can explain such survival and expansion, for it is the evidence of every known case in modern times[31] — in those cases, that is, for which good evidence is available — that an armed struggle of this kind will otherwise dwindle and fail. So true is this, by all the evidence, that one may even take from it a general rule.

It thus appears that a struggle of this kind (and perhaps *any* revolutionary struggle?) will succeed so long as mass participation gains progressively on the substitution that is practised, necessarily, by an initiating vanguard: by a vanguard, that is, which has the political skill, courage and readiness for self-sacrifice required to launch the processes of mass participation in the making of systemic change. It fails in the contrary case: wherever, that is, substitution gains progressively on participation. If participation gains, the revolution is made; if participation thereafter continues to gain — but only if — then the revolution is made good. This, in any case, is what the African evidence combines to show, and does so as the only tenable explication of the aims and ideas of these movements, of the content of their policies and methods, and of their failures and successes. If these are peasant movements of a new type along the 'continuum' of African nationalist development, then they are centrally so because they have tackled and at least partially solved the problem of peasant participation in the thinking and the action, cultural and political far more than military, that enable a new society to liberate the future from the past. If so, they are movements which can claim a place in world history as well the assured place they already have in African history, for in that case they demonstrate, along with their own particularities, the initiation of Africans into large movements of modernising change whose comparability with other such movements up and down the world is evidently beyond question.

NOTES

1. Angola: 481,351 square miles with a guessed approximate population in 1973 of about five million Africans (not counting several hundred thousands of Angolan refugees in Zambia and Zaire) and 350,000 white civilians, mostly Portuguese. Guiné: 13,948 square miles with (similarly guessed) populations of 800,000 Africans and 3,000 white civilians. Mozambique: 302,328 square miles with about eight million Africans and perhaps 200,000 white civilians.

2. By 1973 the Lisbon regime had committed to active service in these territories a total of metropolitan forces of about 130,000 (as well as local black and white levies). These are the largest forces ever raised in Portuguese history, and, on a *per capita* basis of comparison of population sizes, would be equivalent to 3,250,000 US troops, or more than six times' the largest US army ever committed to South Vietnam.

3. If anglophone writers have seldom wished to define rural Africans as peasants, this may be because the word in English contexts refers to historical categories which have long since vanished from the English scene. One finds no such hesitation with francophone writers: with them, moreover, the word 'peasant' is commonly applied to many rural French people, although it is a very long time since a French peasant's household has been 'characterised by the nearly total integration of the peasant family's life with its farming enterprise'. Or is it merely that definitions applied to Africans 'have to be' different from those applied to Europeans, or at least to Englishmen: as, for example, with the familiar English reference to 'African tribes' when writing of communities whose type and history, self-consciousness and coherence, would have long since earned them in Europe the name of 'nations'?

4. I have elsewhere discussed Portuguese secondary sources for overseas history in Africa, and this is not the place to discuss primary sources, except perhaps that one should mention, as a guide to their wealth Ryder *[1965]*, listing 997 documents housed in Lisbon and elsewhere. For recent non-Portuguese sources (with bibliographies) see especially Birmingham *[1966]*, Boxer *[1963]*, Duffy *[1959]*, Wheeler *[in Duffy, 1959: part I]*, and Pélissier *[1971]*.

5. E.g., Vansina *[1966]*, Birmingham *[1966]*, Wheeler *[in Duffy, 1959: part I]*, and various papers including 'Origins of African Nationalism in Angola' in Chilcote, ed., *1972*; and, above all, in the matter of Euro-African interaction a pathfinding and highly relevant study of the Zambesian *prazos:* A. F. Isaacman *[1972]*. For a recent work on the nationalist movements and their history, see Mondlane *[1969]*, Davidson *[1969a and 1972]*, with their bibliographies, and J. S. Saul *[1973]*.

6. For a recent study of this attitude in a 'classical' case, C. Coquéry-Vidrovitch *[1972]*; there one may see how the French state was content to make its effort merely on behalf of concessionary companies, always provided, of course, that the cost of the effort was paid for by local taxation. The comparison with Angola is especially interesting.

7. I described the contractual system in Angola in *The African Awakening [1955]*, and have since reviewed it in a general way in Davidson *[1972]*, and bibliographies.

8. Notably in his Decree 137 of 1921; see Davidson *[1972: 128]*.

9. Now, at last, beginning to be studied in detail. See e.g. E. de S. Ferreira *[forthcoming]*. In 1960 the proportion of *assimilados* was around two per cent of the whole population in Angola, rather less in Mozambique, and less than 0.3 per cent in Guiné. The offshore islands (Cape Verdes, Sao Thomé and Principe) were, at least in principle, subject to a different categorisation.

10. E.g. F. Nogueira (when Portuguese Foreign Minister during the 1960s): 'We alone, before anyone else, brought to Africa the notion of human

rights and racial equality. We alone practised the principle of multi-racialism, which all now consider to be the most perfect and daring expression of human brotherhood and sociological progress. . . . Our African provinces are more developed, more progressive in every respect than any recently independent territory in Africa south of the Sahara, without exception' *[Naguira, 1967: 154-5]*. One can only marvel at such verbiage, said at a time, moreover, when large parts of all three "provinces" were engulfed in war.

11. The leaders of African nationalism in these territories, or those at least who could rightly claim to be authentic, had long since grasped the nature of Portugal's weakness by the times the wars began. For them, Portugal was and is in no real sense an imperialist power but only the 'ideologised agent' of other and genuine imperialist powers. Thus Amilcar Cabral in 1965: 'Ce qui caractérise fondamentalement de nos jours le colonialisme portugais est un fait très simple: le colonialisme portugais, ou si vous le préférez, l'infrastructure économique portugaise, ne peut pas se donner le luxe de faire du néo-colonialisme. C'est à partir de ce point que nous pouvons comprendre toute l'attitude, tout l'entêtement du colonialisme portugais envers nos peuples. Si le Portugal avait un développement économique avançé, si le Portugal pouvait être classé comme pays développé, nous ne serions sûrement pas aujourd'hui en guerre contre le Portugal' *[1965: 152]*. Nothing, in short, could be hoped from Portuguese reformism save a more or less meaningless manipulation of the *status quo*: hence the compensation for the pains and sufferings of these wars to overthrow the *status quo* lies, for the nationalists, in the avoidance of a reformist 'neo-colonialism'.

12. That it has so spread is what the Portuguese authorities, of course, deny. Yet the whole trend over the past few years, as defined in a large body of evidence from many different and contrasting sources, stands at variance with the Portuguese claim, and not least the size of their present armed forces fighting in Africa

13. So-called because they do not use the name itself, this being a Portuguese colonial usage borrowed from their western neighbours, the Ovimbundu. Their main components are Luvale, Luchazi, Chokwe and Mbunda, with numerous sub-groups. When emigrants in Zambia these peoples often refer to themselves as Ma-Wiko, the 'people of the west', which, when in Zambia, is what they geographically are.

14. *3° Recenseamento Geral de Populaçao: Prov. de Angola,* Luanda, vol. 3.

15. Not to be confused with Mbundu (Ovimbundu), and still less with the Kimbundu.

16. Ministry of Colonies *[1942]*, but written of the decades of Pôrto's experience in Angola (1847-90).

17. Based on information collected shortly before the first world war: espec. pp. 65, 84, 92.

18. Walking that way in 1970 with guerrillas of the Angolan nationalist movement, the MPLA — most of that little detachment being Mbunda — I was shown the site of the house 'where *Mwene* Bando ruled', and it was clear, from this and other incidents, that the memory of pre-colonial independence was still a warm one. Here, after all, it had existed only fifty years earlier.

19. See Davidson *[1969b]*, for extended discussion of 'ancestral charters'.

20. Galvão *[1934* (but written in 1930): *303]*. An experienced Angolan administrator, Galvão was well qualified to know what he was talking about and, of course, had access to primary administrative sources until his opposition to the régime became active, leading to his imprisonment and later escape abroad.

21. Founded clandestinely in Luanda late in 1956.

22. In 'National Liberation and Culture': address delivered at Syracuse

University, New York, in commemoration of the late Eduardo Mondlane, the Mozambican leader who was assassinated by a parcel-bomb delivered in January 1969.

23. All of them have had to contend with more or less serious crises caused by the falling-away of individuals or of groups who have thought that the time had come to negotiate peace with the colonial power, and get whatever minor concessions the colonial power might be ready to offer; or who have preferred a limited ethnic-group advantage, or hoped-for advantage, over national aims; or who have taken concealed service with the colonial power against promises of personal advantage. Some of these have not stopped short of assassination, as with the killing of Amilcar Cabral in January 1972, and a reportedly comparable plot against the MPLA leader, Agostinho Neto, in that same month.

24. The depth of General Spínola's political understanding may perhaps be gauged by one of his recent statements when replying to a question from a South African journalist about the origins of 'guerrilla subversion in Africa'. For General Spínola, it is all a question of outside machination and invasion, and goes back to the victory over the Nazi-Fascist coalition in the second world war. 'The last war,' he said, 'ended with the triumph of a political and social ideology which, under the guise of humanity and respect for the individual human's rights, was based on political premises deliberately extended to a mankind that, because of its cultural hetereogeneity, cannot naturally assimilate it'. If only Hitler had won! Quotation in Venter *[1973: 185]*.

25. Formed in 1964 with an original nucleus of 900 men, this army has been much expanded since. See Davidson *[1969a]* for extended record and discussion.

26. The passage comes from an address delivered in Havana in 1966.

27. 'My own view,' he said in 1967, 'is that there are no real conflicts between the peoples of Africa. There are only conflicts between their élites. When the people take power into their own hands, as they will do with the march of events in this continent, there will remain no great obstacles to effective African solidarity. Already we see in our own case how the various peoples of Guiné are finding co-operation more and more possible and useful as they free themselves from attitudes of tribal strife — attitudes that were encouraged, directly or indirectly, by colonial rule and its consequences'. Quoted in Davidson *[1969a: 139]*.

28. Or any implications deriving from Fanonist ideas about 'the inherent virtues of violence'.

29. Quoted in *Socialist Register*, Merlin Press, London 1970, p. 237.

30. A point that would take us too far here; but consider, for example, the defections from FRELIMO in 1968-9, and the manifestly greater strength and solidarity that FRELIMO has since displayed.

31. Whether in the guerrilla-type movements of the Second World War in Europe, in China and South-Eastern Asia (the well-known Malayan case being the one that failed to win a widening participation, and was defeated), very obviously in Latin America, and now in the African colonies of Portugal.

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