

Crises and Reverses

The great waves of social accomplishment coursing across the African diaspora did encounter obstacles. The mountains of previous prejudice and hierarchy stood firmly, sometimes barely eroding as the waves of change crashed against them. The tide of black activism, even at its peak, encountered disappointments and disasters, in part because the advances brought black people into exposed positions on political and cultural stages, where they became vulnerable to divisions among themselves and to counterattacks from outside their community.¹¹

Within sub-Saharan Africa, the great political conflict of the early 1960s came in the Congo, which moved hurriedly to independence as the Belgian colonial regime suddenly realized it could no longer deny even local elections to the colony's population. The sudden national elections created a parliament with three groups: an ethnically based party centered around the capital Leopoldville (Kinshasa), a regionally based party led by elite families in the copper-rich southeast, and a loose coalition called the Mouvement National Congolais. The latter had support in several regions and was led by Patrice Lumumba, who had participated in international pan-African meetings. Lumumba became prime minister, but his independence-day condemnation of Belgian colonialism put him in confrontation with the former rulers. The Congolese army soon mutinied against its Belgian officers. Then one opposition party leader challenged Lumumba's leadership and another announced the secession of Katanga province, in association with the copper mining firms. Lumumba sustained his position in the summer of 1960, appealing to the United Nations and the United States to support the integrity of the new nation and UN member state. When no help was forthcoming, he turned to the Soviet Union for aid. This request was sufficient to galvanize his opponents. Joseph Desiré Mobutu, the reporter who became Lumumba's defense minister, seized power and turned Lumumba over to his enemies in Katanga, who executed him in January 1961. Both Belgian officials and

the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency were implicated in these events. From there, Congo underwent four years of civil war, armed UN intervention, and the seizure of large portions of the country by mercenary-led armies. In the end, it was Mobutu who seized power again in 1965. By 1967, he was even able to host a continent-wide political meeting in his capital.

In the Caribbean, the unfolding Cuban Revolution echoed the principal events taking place elsewhere during the early 1960s. The conflict of Cuban nationalism and U.S. hegemony soon became a cold war conflict pitting strategies of isolation and containment against revolutionary nationalism. The initial conflict was national, as Cuba moved to take over the holdings of U.S.-based sugar companies. The next conflict was social. At this time, wealthy and professional Cubans found their options limited and many began to leave, going especially to the United States. Eventually, the racial dimension of the revolution emerged, as most people of African descent remained in Cuba and their proportion of the population grew. The U.S.-backed invasion that failed at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 further galvanized Cuban nationalism. Then the Soviet Union's attempt to place missiles on Cuban soil brought the brief but terrifying threat of nuclear war in 1962. In 1965 and 1966, Che Guevara traveled to the highlands of eastern Congo-Kinshasa in an unsuccessful attempt to build a rebellion against Mobutu.

The rejection of legal initiatives to gain citizenship rights led to the development of more radical approaches. In South Africa, the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre—in which over sixty unarmed demonstrators were killed by police bullets—confirmed that in that nation armed struggle and confrontation rather than legal political agitation was to determine the path of racial politics. In 1964, the government of South Africa put leaders of the African National Congress, arrested the previous year at Rivonia, on trial for treason. The ANC, denied any outlet for legal political participation, had turned to gathering international support for military action against the apartheid state, and its leaders were in hiding at Rivonia. Of the fourteen men charged (four of them white), eight were convicted and served long terms.¹² Nelson Mandela remained in prison until 1990.

A similar disappointment arose in Mississippi, where a voting-rights campaign developed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The MFDP overcame intimidation to register many black voters and present a slate of delegates at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. These delegates claimed that they rather than the regular Democrats of Mississippi represented the principles of the party. When the convention rejected their petition, the door opened to more militant approaches. One of those responses arose in northern U.S. cities with the growth of the Nation of Islam, which

had come into existence thirty years earlier as an independent Islamic community of blacks highly critical of “white devils.” The group’s slow growth was accelerated by greater black assertiveness and through the energetic preaching of Malcolm X, who converted to Islam while in prison and adopted the last name of X to emphasize how his original name had been taken from his ancestors in times of slavery. At the height of his influence in the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X broke from the organization, took the hajj, became an orthodox Muslim, and adopted a pan-African rather than black nationalist posture. He was assassinated in his New York mosque in 1965. Another militant response was that of the Black Panther Party, beginning in California in 1968. Armed with rifles and the writings of Frantz Fanon, the Panthers demonstrated their right to bear arms in a meeting of the California state legislature. Thereafter until the mid-1970s, this militant group carried on a program of community organization and opposition to police forces in a movement spurred on by, among other things, the actions and philosophies of the Red Guard in China’s Cultural Revolution. Many Black Panthers died from police bullets, and the principal leaders were tried and convicted on charges related to these events.

Two great crises struck West Africa in 1967, one environmental and one political. The rains failed for several years in a row in the grasslands of the savanna and Sahel from Senegal to Chad; both farmers and pastoralists had to struggle through a devastating famine. The drought was associated with El Niño events of the Pacific, but its effects were made more serious by the results of colonial policies that had overextended farmlands and discouraged people from migrating when the drought hit. In Nigeria, meanwhile, a civil war broke out that was to bring about as many as three million deaths through warfare, famine, and disease. Following a political stalemate dividing the north and south of the country and a military seizure of power, the killings of minority Igbo residents in northern cities led to the declaration of secession by the dominantly Igbo southeastern region, which took the name Biafra. Mobile war in the early stages gave way to a war of attrition. International aid arrived far too late to prevent the famine, and Biafra formally surrendered in 1970.

Less immediately disastrous but still disappointing were the developments in urban life. Early black urbanites at the opening of the twentieth century had set the tone for social life in many twentieth-century cities. (Later black arrivals from the countryside found cities both the source of hope for advance but also prisons with multiple levels of hierarchy.) Latin American cities grew at rapid rates in this era, and those with large black populations included the major Brazilian cities, especially São Paulo and

Rio, Caracas in Venezuela, and Bogotá and Cartagena in Colombia. The cities of the Caribbean grew at rates similar to those in mainland Latin America. Havana had long been a major metropolis, but it was now joined by several others: Santo Domingo, Port-au-Prince, Kingston, San Juan, and Nassau. Each of the larger Caribbean islands came to have at least two major cities (and on the two-country island of Hispaniola, Santo Domingo and Santiago in the Dominican Republic and Port-au-Prince and Cap Haitien in Haiti). By 2000, the Caribbean had become well over 50 percent urban. But millions of additional Caribbean migrants had gone to cities outside the region. New York became the largest or second-largest city for Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Jamaicans, and Barbadians; Caracas was the second city for Trinidadians; Paris was the second city for Martinicans. As islanders moved to Caribbean cities, tourists from North America and Europe crowded into new beach resorts, which grew as the prerevolutionary resorts in Havana declined.

African cities were built in a hurry and on the cheap, so they lacked elegant boulevards and efficient transit systems. Leopoldville, the capital of Congo, had grown in population from fifty thousand in 1945 to four hundred thousand at independence in 1960; by 1980, with its name officially changed to Kinshasa, the city had a population of 2.5 million. Nairobi became the East African metropolis. Lagos, as it expanded to the west and north of the island on which it began, became famous for its traffic jams. Nonetheless, each African city developed its own character and, for some of them, a clear charm (see figure 6.1). Abidjan, built on islands and peninsulas around the Ebrié lagoon, made it easy to see one quarter from another. And in Yaoundé, the Cameroonian capital built among hills, the distinctive architecture of government and commercial buildings provided impressive vistas. In Yaoundé as elsewhere in Africa, home construction was carried out in bits and pieces, with persistence paying off. A family had first to get access to land and then obtain cement blocks to begin building. Construction might take years, as families gathered money to pay wages, materials, and fees.

Many people who came to urban areas were not able to settle as homeowners or renters; rather, they lived as squatters in makeshift quarters that gradually blended into the structure of growing cities. These areas became known as *bidonvilles* in French (after the *bidon* or oil drums used in constructing housing), “shantytowns” in English, *barrios* or *barrios chabolas* in Spanish, and *favelas* in Portuguese, as well as by many similar terms in the African languages. In South Africa, where the government maintained more control of settlement than in most places, “townships” were created in the mid-twentieth century for black and colored populations, including

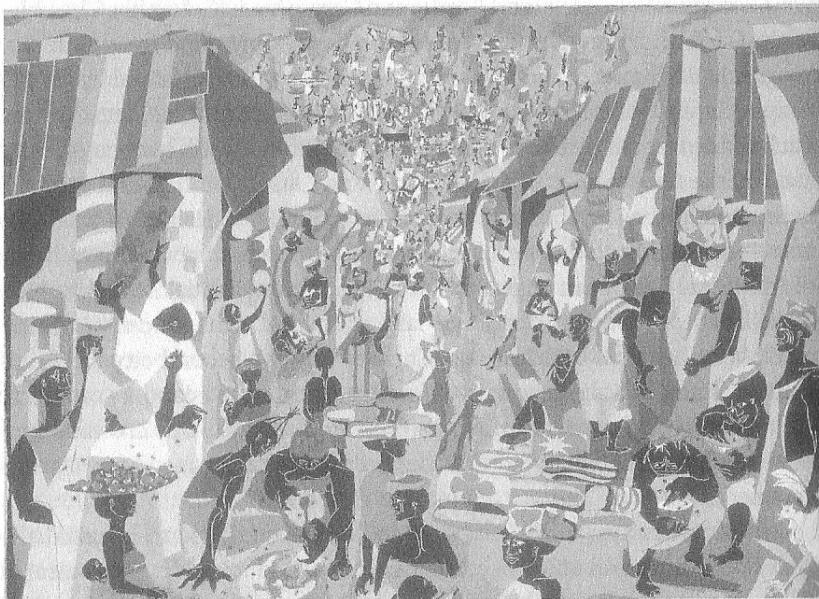


FIGURE 6.1 Urban Nigeria, by Jacob Lawrence

Jacob Lawrence, who came to prominence in the United States in the 1930s, visited and painted in Nigeria in the 1960s. This image in tempera, gouache, and graphite, *Street to Mbari*, is a 1964 street scene in Lagos.

Source: Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

District 6 outside Cape Town and Soweto (for “southwest township”) outside Johannesburg. Somehow the inhabitants of these shantytowns gained access to electric power, water, schooling for their children, and a system of urban transportation. The largest and most rapidly growing of all these shantytowns were the *favelas* of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, but those of Kinshasa, Lagos, Caracas, Abidjan, and Nairobi—as well as Rabat, Cairo, and Jidda—were not far behind. The “ghettos” of cities in the United States were different from black neighborhoods elsewhere in African-diaspora cities, in that black and especially poor populations gravitated toward the center rather than the edges. Bank policies, supported by the U.S. government, provided home loans to enable white families to purchase suburban homes but denied credit to black families.

In Europe, black populations in cities grew from the small enclaves that had long existed into major communities. The rapidly increasing postwar populations of the Caribbean spurred the expanding migration of students,

workers, and job seekers to London, Paris, Liverpool, and Marseille. Similar flows from Africa grew, especially after 1960. One result was that Notting Hill becoming the principal black section of London, a place where an annual August celebration of Carnival became a major social event. Similarly, Brazilian settlers in Paris, white and black, organized celebrations of Carnival in the Brazilian style in the 1970s. There as elsewhere in Europe, the settlement of large black populations brought a period of fierce racial discrimination by conservative nationalistic groups and by white workers who feared displacement. For example, when the Dutch colony of Suriname gained its independence in 1975, the people there were given a choice between Dutch and Surinamese citizenship. While most stayed in Suriname, many thousands settled in the Netherlands, especially Amsterdam. Only later did cordial relations among communities emerge.

The Sixties

The era of the 1960s brought great promise for black people, although it did not carry them into the Promised Land. The long campaign for citizenship brought results in the recognition of national independence for some fifty nations in which black people were numerous, and it brought formal recognition of civil rights in several major countries with multiracial populations. Blacks gained positions of political leadership, black innovations in popular culture gained wide audiences, and black communities carried on aggressive campaigns against racial discrimination.

In regions of the world beyond the African diaspora, the era of the 1960s brought somewhat different perspectives. It was an era of massive revolutionary upheaval in the Cultural Revolution of China, paralleled by the contemporaneous Revolutionary Offensive in Cuba. For the dominantly white areas of Europe and North America, the decade of the 1960s is often recounted as a time of student upheaval, popular cultural innovation, and the formation of a radical New Left. This was the era of the war in Vietnam, in which U.S. troops, along with Western allies, fought against the communist-led forces of Vietnam, which had Chinese and Soviet support—a struggle both about nationalism and the cold war. It was also a moment of reform movements within socialist states, especially in Czechoslovakia.

In practice, the varying experiences of the sixties overlapped each other. As experienced by black people, the sixties unfolded in response to events both outside and inside their community. The effects of China’s Cultural Revolution, the influence of expanded college education, and the rise of a global youth culture became important in Africa and the diaspora. At the

same time, the experience of blacks in the sixties came out of the long struggles of their own communities for citizenship and equality. The sixties of black people included Fanon as well as Marx, black as well as white college students, anticolonial warfare in Angola and Mozambique as well as Vietnam, antiracism in Johannesburg as well as Birmingham, and the new demands of black as well as white women. In the increasingly class-conscious era of the 1960s, blacks tended to see themselves and were seen by others as workers and perhaps also as rural people.

The 1960s brought an era of unprecedented steps toward the goal of racial equality: the near elimination of colonial rule, the discrediting of racial discrimination, and the return of black people to positions of political responsibility in both the New World and the Old World. Confident works of popular culture buoyed the energies of black people and brought admiration from their neighbors. The movements for decolonization and civil rights reshaped the world and proposed an expanded vision of social equality. These social changes reverberated around the planet, constituting a central aspect of “the sixties” and a fundamental change in the political and social balance of the world.

New Inequalities, 1970–1988

The social changes favoring blacks as individuals and in groups could not continue without interruption, though achievements of blacks as individuals and in groups continued. Yet so also did explicit examples of racial discrimination and the subtle limits on black people that came to be known as “institutional racism.” To a certain degree, these two trends were more of the same struggle that had gone on for generations. Yet there were also new forms of social advance for blacks and new obstacles to black equality. On the positive side, the notion of social equality for people of African descent gained steadily wider acceptance as it moved forward in the company of campaigns against discrimination by gender or religion and with newer campaigns against discrimination by age and by disability. On the negative side, economic stagnation, ecological crisis, charges of reverse discrimination, discrimination in international law, and growing divisions within black communities each required new tactics to combat them. The new decade brought spectacular advances for new elites, especially in entertainment and sports, and for some in politics. But in the 1970s, it became clear that there would remain many hindrances to black equality and that several new sorts of inequality were emerging. With political responsibility came greed

and corruption. Former colonial powers could now choose to neglect the nations for which they had earlier held responsibility. Conditions of education and health improved markedly but brought limited economic rewards.

Global Stagnation and Restructuring

In every corner of the world, the long postwar economic boom gave out at the end of the 1960s. Unemployment rates rose, agricultural prices fell, and for a time both workers’ incomes and corporate profits declined. Encouraged by low interest rates and slowing economic growth, African and Latin American countries borrowed heavily from groups of banks organized by the World Bank at the end of the 1960s. Then an economic crisis in 1973 and 1974 put many countries in dire straits. The trigger was the October 1973 war in which Egypt and Syria attacked Israel in attempt to reverse their defeat in 1967. When the United States and the Netherlands gave strong support to Israel and repelled the attacks, the OPEC cartel (with Arab voices dominant but not exclusive) doubled the price of crude oil and then doubled it again. In addition, Arab countries halted oil shipments to the United States and some European countries. The war was brought to an end, but prices of petroleum products and many other manufactures rose rapidly. Currency markets were thrown out of joint, gold prices skyrocketed, and—most important for debtor nations—interest rates rose suddenly to nearly 20 percent per year. The interest burden on loans was now so high that many countries were threatened with default. The International Monetary Fund took hold of the situation and made debt repayment—including the new, higher interest rates—its top priority. It developed the notion of “structural adjustment policies,” requiring debtor nations to cut back on public services.¹³ The result was sharp reductions in spending on schools, health, infrastructure, and government service generally. The structural adjustment programs continued for about thirty years.

Empires were disappearing in the aftermath of World War II, yet the hegemonic power that had sustained empires rapidly took new forms. The global socioeconomic system thus came to operate at a new and more complex scale. Most unmistakably, giant corporations stretched their influence far beyond their home country. Leaders included the Dutch-British petroleum firm Shell Oil, the U.S. automobile firm General Motors, the Swiss food distribution firm Nestlé, the Japanese shipping firm Mitsubishi, and the German chemical firm Bayer. In addition, semigovernmental organizations of worldwide scope took form and expanded rapidly. The United Nations, created in 1945 to replace the defunct League of Nations, is the most obvious

example. Organizations that developed under the UN umbrella included the World Health Organization and UNESCO, the educational and cultural organization that became so important in helping small and poor nations contribute to global cultural discourse. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, founded in 1945 and based in Washington, D.C., served as a consortium of the wealthy nations and big banks focused on stabilizing the world economy.

For blacks, who had just regained entry to formal politics, it immediately became necessary to launch superpolitical activity at the global level. Of course, black activists had devoted themselves to creating international organizations for many decades. The Universal Negro Improvement Association had a broad and impressive influence in the 1920s. The periodic Pan-African Congresses, beginning in 1900, were highly influential in creating political goals. When the Organization of African Unity formed in 1963, the scope of pan-Africanism narrowed for a time from the whole African diaspora to the home continent alone. On the economic front, OPEC has come to include significant representation of black populations: Venezuela was one of the five founding nations in 1960, and Nigeria joined later, along with two other African countries, Algeria and Libya. Other countries important in oil production with large black populations include Angola, Gabon, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United States.

Kwame Nkrumah envisioned the creation of a United States of Africa through federation of newly independent African nations. The idea gained a few steps but no more. Ghana and Guinea declared themselves to be united in 1958, and Mali joined the union in 1960. But Felix Houphouet-Boigny, the principal leader of Ivory Coast since 1946, had become closely tied to France and joined the pro-American President Tubman of Liberia to form the Monrovia Group of African states. This group favored a “moderate” policy in opposition to the smaller Casablanca Group of states that included Nkrumah and his pan-Africanist allies. Soon after, a truce was arranged and the two groups met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1963, to form the Organization of African Unity, which included all independent African states.¹⁴ Excluded from the OAU were the white-ruled territories, mostly in southern Africa.

Quite a different organization relevant to the lives of black people is the Organization of the Islamic Conference, formed in 1969 to hold annual conferences to discuss concerns common to nations with large Islamic populations.¹⁵ Thirteen African countries became charter members, and ten more joined in the 1970s. Since then five more African countries and two Caribbean countries (Guyana and Suriname) have joined. The nations with the largest Muslim populations of African descent that have chosen not to affil-

iate with the OIC are (in rough order of the size of their Muslim population) Ethiopia, the United States, Congo-Kinshasa, Eritrea, Tanzania, Kenya, and Malawi. Another set of international meetings, organized beginning in 1986, is that of the Francophone countries, that is, the countries where French is spoken as a significant language. Following years of annual meetings of Francophone African states with the French president, Léopold Senghor of Senegal and Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia led the way in organizing a more formal organization to sustain the use of the French language—partly to offset the expanded use of English. The organization became permanent, with biennial conferences, and includes a system of cooperation among French-language universities.

Great powers, though relinquishing political control of colonies, sought to maintain global military power. Thus the United Kingdom, in giving up its colonies, sought initially to retain a set of island military bases from Africa to Australia. The United States, the dominant partner in the cold war alliance, encouraged this continued British presence. The British gradually narrowed their plan down to the Chagos Islands, two thousand kilometers northeast of Mauritius but part of that colony. As Mauritius became independent, its government agreed to cede the islands to Britain, creating what became known as the British Indian Ocean Territory. More quietly, the Mauritian authorities allowed the British to remove the Chagos Islands population (known as Zilios) from their homes and deposit them as refugees in Mauritius—though this later caused a political scandal. Then in treaties of 1966, 1972, and 1976, the British leased one of the Chagos islands, Diego Garcia, to the U.S. military. Diego Garcia later became central to U.S. military activities in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and elsewhere in the Indian Ocean region.