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CAPITALISM AND PEASANT AGRICULTURE

IN AFRICA

by

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INTRODUCTION

The inability of capitalism to destroy pre-capitalist relations of production in African agriculture, or its co-existence with such relations of production has led to various theories purporting to explain the manner in which pre-capitalist modes of production are "usually" incorporated into, or subordinated to the capitalist mode of production during the early phases of capitalist development. In Volume One of Capital, Marx had drawn attention to the necessity of the capitalist mode of production (CMOP) to use labour "as it finds it" in the period just preceding the advent of capitalism. That such pre-capitalist modes should therefore be found in various stages of articulation or co-existence with the CMOP in Africa is nothing peculiar; what needs to be investigated is why the CMOP has not "wiped out" pre-capitalist modes which, by their continued existence, either impede social progress or are signs of social backwardness. Inherent in this agenda for research is the assumption that capitalist development would bring better social progress - at least better than what exists in Africa today?

Whether capitalist development is possible or not, and whether socialism can be posed as a real and possible/realizable alternative, many have argued that peasant agriculture could be a permanent feature of both capitalism and socialism since agricultural production is not always easy to either capitalize or socialize. While arguments continue regarding the role of peasants in capitalist or socialist development in Africa, changes of a capitalist kind plus persistence of peasant agriculture remain features of rural Africa. The Kenyan case discussed in this paper demonstrates that the development of capitalist relations of production has been occurring. Kenya, without breaking out of her dependent position in the world economy, has experienced stable - and at times rapid - growth of her manufacturing sector: the contribution of the monetary sector to the GDP has been rising, the contribution of manufactured goods to total goods exported has also been rising, and the amount of goods manufactured locally entering into the consumption patterns of local households has also increased. All these are examples of an economy that is very far from being typified as "a natural economy". More important, the number of capitalists and workers has also been on the increase. Kenya, for all intents and purposes, is part and parcel of the world capitalist system.

Yet, unlike the USA or in Great Britain, peasants remain the biggest component of society in Kenya as well as elsewhere in Africa. And although the peasants are active participants in the monetized economy, this alone does not reveal their actual place in the process of capitalist production. The manner in which they are exploited by capital - if at all (depending, of course, on the class of the peasantry we are talking about) - differs from that by which labour (wage labour) is exploited. Yet, however it does it, the state derives its sustenance from peasant agriculture, and the state uses this to superintend over the reproduction of capital as a whole. Hence the health of capitalist development - up until

now - has been intrinsically connected with the reproduction of peasant agriculture. The critical question therefore is : CAN CAPITALIST ACCUMULATION CONTINUE TO OCCUR, LEADING TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A VIABLE HOME MARKET, UNDER SITUATIONS WHERE PEASANTS ARE THE DIRECT PRODUCERS IN AGRICULTURE, AND THE STATE AND OTHER SOCIAL CLASSES SURVIVE BY SIPHONING OFF SURPLUSES FROM THE PEASANTRY?

We shall discuss the above question with particular reference to Kenya.

Underdevelopment and the Questionable Progressive Character of Late-Late Capitalism

In the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels viewed the development of capitalism as progressive; it was progressive in the sense that it would improve productive forces and open society to better possibilities of satisfying the needs of mankind. With the coming of capitalism, man would be in a much better position to conquer nature, harness it for his own needs, work less, enjoy more and improve all his faculties.

But the same Communist Manifesto also observed that the relations of production under capitalism, the class relations, would always be a fetter to further social progress. The basic contradiction in capitalist society is that between the direct producers and the owners of the means of production, that between labour and capital, that between the producers of social wealth and those who appropriate this wealth. This contradiction produces struggles, or struggles are generated as a result of it. Class contradictions, in an open and overt sense, usually manifest themselves in diverse ways, in different social formations and at different historical moments. Further, social progress would occur under capitalism depending on the outcome of such struggles. The Manifesto - and other works by Marx and Engels - argued that the full fruits of man's labour would not be enjoyed by him as a direct producer unless and until the capitalist mode of production is abolished and replaced by a socialist one. In the meantime, the struggle would continue, and there was no computer package, then available to either Marx or Engels, that would have told them what strategies the antagonistic classes would use to lengthen their leases on life! Capitalists, for that matter, have astounded revolutionaries and utopian theorists alike, by their ingenuity to adopt to different historical conditions, thereby making the CMOF much more resilient than the 19th Century socialists expected.

Lenin wrote a brief essay on how capitalism adjusted to its internal crises as a result of the struggles mentioned above towards

the end of the 19th Century. Colonialism was the direct result of capitalist imperialist expansion abroad. Since then, underdevelopment theory has elaborated on arguments positing the survival of western capitalism as having been partly based on the exploitation of the Third World; and partly on adjustments to its own internal crises. This process of transferring value from the Third World (or the periphery) to the western capitalist world (or the center) constitutes the core of underdevelopment theory as is found in the writings of Walter Rodney, Andre Gunder Frank and Samir Amin.* To summarise, it was necessary for the Third World to be incorporated into the world capitalist system for the following reasons:

- (a) Capitalism of the Center could no longer reproduce itself within its own geographical frontiers. Workers were waging relentless struggles for better economic conditions and more political power; their gains were beginning to limit the extent to which they could be exploited. Capitalists therefore decided to diversify their risks by investing abroad. Virgin Third World countries became an open terrain for investments in mining, agriculture, commerce and - subsequently - manufacture.
- (b) Capitalism of the Center, faced with problems of expanded reproduction, was forced, by the very logic of this reproduction, to seek new markets overseas - markets not only for capital investment but also for selling manufactured goods and acquiring raw materials. Finance capital played a central role in this imperialist expansion.

Whatever controversies have surrounded theories seeking to explain capitalist imperialist expansion into Africa, it is difficult to refute the above arguments as having been relevant in explaining why the Third World in general was incorporated into the capitalist world system. The very process of incorporation was, of course, undertaken in different ways in different parts of the world. Particular political "moments" were used by capital to extend its tentacles "beyond Chinese walls". The princes, kings, prime ministers and dukes - all assembled in Berlin in 1884/85 - might have given the Congo to King Leopold of Belgium "as a birthday present"; the real reason, however, why the Congo went to Leopold was that "it was too precious a jewel to go to the crown of any other powerful monarch!" In other words, the economic motive of imperialism was paramount, and the logic of incorporating the non capitalist world into the capitalist world was to ensure the reproduction of the CMOF.

*See Bibliography.

Enter the peasant, his hoe and his family labour.

If capitalism makes use of labour "just as it finds it in the period preceding the advent of the CMOP", then what better setting could have been there for western capitalism than the African rural dweller: cultivator, hunter-gatherer, peasant in a natural economy, the feudal landlord and his serfs, etc? The manner in which these rural dwellers would be incorporated into the CMOP so as to ensure the reproduction of the latter would, of course, vary. The variance would depend on:

- (a) the character of pre-capitalist labour processes in each MOP typical of a particular social formation;
- (b) the purpose for which they were being incorporated into the CMOP, i.e. to produce coffee or tea, to work in mines or on the settlers' farms; etc
- (c) the struggles waged by the rural communities themselves and the tactics adopted by their class adversaries so as to defeat, co-opt, or divide and rule them. The invariant factor in these processes of incorporation was, of course, the transfer of value from the pre-capitalist to the CMOP.

In regard to all these points, particularly (c) above, the role of the state is central: the processes of transforming Africans into various classes imbricated into the capital/wage labour nexus were all translated into law and systematically regulated and enforced by the state.

So peasant societies develop and come into being out of previously mobile hunters and gatherers. Similarly, self-subsistent peasants also became a feature of rural Africa just as much as kulak farmers, day-jobbers and the squatter. None of these social categories and classes have chosen to "arise or fall"; they are a product of history - the history of capitalist development in Africa.

When the peasantry was engulfed into capitalist production in England - the classic, and at times legendary, case of capitalist development - the enclosure movement drove the disinherited rural lot into urban areas to fend for themselves as a proletariat or be banished to foreign lands as thieves, vagabonds and harlots. A good number found work as labourers in the booming English manufactures and quite a number also beefed up the Empire's population overseas. As English industry prospered, so did its capitalised agriculture also grow from strength to strength. The success of British agriculture after the industrial revolution was because it was industrialised agriculture; the British bourgeoisie won a decisive battle over the rural feudal lords

to push agriculture fully into the belly of industry. This battle was not won on the peaceful planning tables of government officials; it was fought with fire and brimstone in the British Parliament and the state intervened heavily to break the backbone of the backward classes in rural England. Rural development, for the English industrial revolution, was not undertaken through national studies of World Bank programmes or their equivalents then; rural development came as industrial agricultural development - the product of one of the most profound class struggles in modern history.

The same can be said of North American agriculture. North American capitalism did not care for labour found in that sub-continent in the period just preceding the advent of the CMOP. Since it became possible - through the ever ingenious and evil brains of capitalists - to import slave labour from Africa, the southern plantations extracted absolute surplus value from the natives of Africa at a rate history has yet to record.¹ As for the corn-field farmer in Iowa, one should wonder what happened to the Indians whom he could have used as his labourers: the so-called "Indian reservations" speak for themselves. The truth is: by importing negro slave labour and killing (and bantustanizing) the Indian, capitalist agriculture in the USA approached the peasant labour question in two different ways both of which have not been repeated in Africa. Following the civil war, thanks to the intervention of industrial capital from the North-east USA, the plantation system in the South was abolished and southern agriculture started developing on the same line as the north. North American agriculture is, today, one of the most successful: it is not based on peasant agriculture. What else, then, would explain this success?

The following may provide some of the major characteristics of the development of the USA agricultural economy from which we can build an answer to the question immediately posed above:

- (a) agriculture developed from being divided into two (a southern economy producing cheap exports and a northern economy producing for the home market) to one internally organized to produce primarily for the home market,
- (b) agriculture and industry grew as mutually reinforcing sectors of a single economy each feeding the other with the necessary inputs within the framework of a home market;
- (c) subsequently, the US agro-industry has grown so strong that it needs the shell of US imperialism to sell its surplus production overseas and to continue expanding only by dominating the agricultural economy of less industrialised countries. Agribusiness has become a major component of US imperialism and her hegemonic politics.

¹ see, for example, Capitalism and Slavery
² see, for example, Barrington Moore Jr.

The late-late-late industrialisers (Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe etc) and the other industrializing countries - in spite of the clear-cut message that underdeveloped theory gave them - seem to still continue attempting industrializing without first resolving the kinds of problems that the USA resolved by the Civil War. It would appear that, in this day and age, it is even much more difficult for these late-late-late industrializers to succeed in their industrialization projects without solving the peasant question. Underdeveloped and dependent capitalism, by continuing to preserve the peasantry in various forms, has so far not succeeded to chart a clear path for successful capitalist accumulation either in Africa or Latin America. Why is this the case? What programmes have been tried and why have they failed to liquidate the peasantry? What lessons can we learn from countries like Argentina? We shall lay the ground for answering these questions by first looking at an African case study - Kenya.

The Kenyan Case

Sufficient literature now exists to show that capitalist agriculture has existed in Kenya for a long time. White settlers started accumulating land and coercing and exploiting labour through administrative fiat by the first decade of this century. By the third decade, indigenous Africans - especially in the Central Province - already had the tutored avarice to be capitalist accumulators. African accumulation was, however, greatly circumscribed by apartheid regulations. The removal of the latter in the 1950s as part of the neo-colonization process opened the frontiers of both property and capital accumulation in agriculture for Africans. Again using the intervening hand of the state - this time commandeering state loans to help buy land - Africans became owners of both large and small scale land within a very short span of time in the sixties and early seventies. By the time the land frontier was closing, a few large-scale land-owners could qualify as capitalist farmers. The major part of agricultural production, however, remained in the hands of the "small-scale farmer." While the process of capitalist development in agriculture in colonial Kenya had taken place by a more intensive process of proletarianizing the peasantry in the main "cash-crop growing regions", the process of capitalist development in post-colonial Kenya has seen this process being reversed in these regions, and peasant society being re-entrenched. Formerly disinherited peasants have, once more, been reunited with mother earth and, however diverse their land-holdings may be in terms of size and productivity, their class positions as peasants have, in reality, been re-entrenched.

But it must also be reiterated that the manner in which different regions of Kenya were incorporated into the CMOF differed greatly. This, indeed, was one of the points developed in the

3. See, for example, the controversy between Apollo Njonjo and Mike Cowen in "Kenya: The Agrarian Question," by Anyanjo Nyonjo et al, Review of African Political Economy, No. 20, 1981

debate on "Kenya: The Agrarian Question". But the differences, by themselves, are not important: their importance lies in the implications they have for class formation and hence for politics. Commodity production, for example, followed ethnic boundaries: thus the battle of sugar growers becomes a Luo/Luhya battle; that of coffee cooperatives becomes confined to Agikuyu co-operators and their Agikuyu bosses, or equally of the Gusii in western Kenya. The problem of land hunger was essentially voiced by the Agikuyu peasants, hence Mau Mau became mainly "their thing". In this regard, appearances have not usually been too far from reality and, coupled with the way post-colonial dominant classes have planned their strategies in politics, maintaining peasants in the countryside with some economic payoffs and dosages of ethnic ideologies, sometimes "those who do not have" keep on hoping that "they will have" whenever "their man" gets power. Poor peasants, rich peasants, co-operative exploiters all then join hands to support "their son", whether the latter is milking them dry or decapitalizing the whole national economy! That is part of the reality of class struggle among the peasantry.

Because members of the ruling class derive their social base from the peasantry, they are compelled, by the necessity of reproducing themselves, to reproduce the peasant society as well. The most successful populist within the ruling circles is the one who defends the interests of the "small man" in the countryside. And since Kenya does not have a bourgeoisie with an independent urban/industrial base strong enough to champion policies independent of the peasantry, state policy is caught between two opposing forces: imperialism - which dominates society, and the peasantry - to which the ruling class must make constant concessions, eg by granting and defending peasants' right to property in land.

What, in the meantime, is happening to surpluses from agriculture? Are these surpluses being used for capital formation (i.e. capitalist development) or do they simply disappear within the circuit of consumption? What explains the manner in which these surpluses are used?

Peasant surpluses

- Poor peasants, subsisting on "patches of the earth", little or no other sources of income except from occasional hiring of their own labour to others: these are unsystematically exploited through occasional wage labour but their surpluses are more systematically appropriated through the trade circuit where agricultural commodities suffer adverse terms of trade with urban and manufactured goods.
- Ordinary peasants, cultivating home gardens which provide sufficient subsistence throughout the year for the family which constitutes the labour force. Ordinary peasants are more systematically exploited through the trade circuit and commercial capital depends on them for a good part of its own

reproduction.⁴ But since the "buying power" of the ordinary peasants is limited by the subsistence nature of their economy, this also puts a limit to the extent by which commercial capital can expand its operations. It is therefore no wonder that market places and retail shops are scattered so far from each other and there are hardly any wholesale shops in the rural areas; commercial capital simply has outlets in the rural areas - it is not, in many cases really there! The surpluses thus cornered migrate rather fast towards the big urban centers.

- **Middle Peasants**, the so-called bearers of the peasant tradition are the major producers of surplus extracted among the peasantry and the ones who suffer most by seeing outside forces pump surpluses away from them. Such forces include international market forces, the state, finance capital, commercial capital and various fractions of international capital who never lack the ingenuity of dreaming up formulae for "developing the rural poor", and this includes the venerated "outgrower schemes" now the darling of certain "progressive scholars". The shifting of international terms of trade has adversely affected the middle peasant commodity producer systematically since 1972;⁵ the manner in which commercialisation of both food and non-food consumer goods has been organized by the state has favoured accumulation outside agriculture.

- **The rich capitalist farmers:** Large scale commercial farming date back to the beginning of colonialism from when, for over fifty years, apartheid laws confined it to white farmers. In the 1950s, as part of the neo-colonization process, large-scale farming was opened to Africans. Indigenous African capital therefore spread fast into large scale farming especially in the Central and Rift Valley Provinces. M. Cowen, A. Njonjo, M.P. Sorrenson and others* have already written extensively on this. What, however, we need to note here is the class aspects of large-scale commercial farming. Both in his much longer work, The Africanisation of the White Highlands* and in his essay in the RAPE No 20, Njonjo demonstrates that there has been a differentiation of the peasantry in the Central Province and the Rift Valley due to capitalist development in agriculture which has meant two things: increasing concentration of land assets into the hands of very few landowners which, in effect, constitute a rural bourgeoisie; increasing pauperization of most peasant households, turning them into a declassed social stratum, owners of mere patches of the earth, rural proletariat, impoverished small peasants, etc. Cowen contradicts Njonjo's observation, and while both accept the emergence of a landed capitalist class in Central Province and the Rift Valley, Cowen disagrees with Njonjo regarding the degree of marginalization of the peasantry in these two provinces. This marginalization has occurred, not where it would have been

4. See, for example, M.R. Cowen, "Change in State Power, International Conditions and peasant producers: The Case of Kenya", City of London Polytechnic 1983.
 5. See M.R. Cowen, "Change in State Power".
 * See bibliography.

expected to occur - Central Province - but in Western, and I would add, Nyowza Provinces. Concomitant with the making of a landed bourgeoisie, international and state finance capital underwent the birth of a solid middle peasantry in Central and Rift Valley provinces in the sixties. Elsewhere, except for the case of outgrower contract farmers in Mumias, the development and consolidation of a middle peasantry has not been as successful.

Both middle peasant and large-scale commercial agriculture are, however, currently in crisis. This is largely because of the type of commodities produced and the dependence of such commodities on world market prices. Thus agriculture cannot ensure a stable sustenance of middle peasant standard of living nor can the African class of capital in agriculture - recent entrants into the realm of commercial farming - feel secure enough to depend entirely on agriculture as a source of their livelihood.

Further, since the development of commodity production in agriculture has occurred as a result of the process of integration into the world capitalist system of Kenya as "an export economy", production is not oriented towards the provision of inputs for the internal market. This means, of course, the disarticulation between agriculture and industry and the non-existence of an "internal economy" to whose dynamics agricultural developments would respond.

Agricultural Development and Capitalist Industrialization: Implications of the "Kenyan Model" to Africa in General.

Export-led agriculture, like export-led industrialization, assume returns high enough from the world market from which a "social fund" can be accumulated for purposes of industrialization. The experience of the past two decades, however, show that the terms of trade have generally been in favour of exporters of manufactured goods and against exporters of primary commodities. To solve both the balance-of-payments and the trade deficits crises, primary commodity exporters have been urged to develop import-substitution as well as export-led industries. But, as several studies have shown, these have generally led to further transnationalization of such economies with specific projects leading to more decapitalization rather than generation of surpluses that are used for internal accumulation. Thus industrialization by transnationalization continue to heighten the disarticulation between agriculture and industry while, at the same time, socio-economic structures and institutions are created which are inimical to the development of nation-building process.

To concretize the above observation, a critical question needs to be posed: what are the historical preconditions for a successful industrialization process?

6. In the case of Kenya, see my own synthesis on the Kenyan experience in "The Possibilities and Historical Limitations of Import Substitution Industrialization in Kenya" paper presented to "The Future of Africa" Project of "Nation Building or Transnationalization in Africa? The State, Industrialization and Mining Resources", UNITAR/UNU, Dakar, Senegal, Jan 25-28 1984.

Assuming, for the moment, that it is historically possible for Africa to undertake capitalist industrialization, then it is necessary to examine the conditions under which such a process would be initiated. So far, experiences such as Kenya's have not yielded very positive results. How, for example, would social forces that can spearhead capitalist industrialization come into being? What would make such social forces have the capacity to spearhead industrialization? What would they need to do to spearhead such industrialization process?

Samir Amin has pointed out that, for a nation-building industrializing process to be successful, the ruling class within the nation-state should:-

- (i) assume control over the labour power (particularly by organizing agricultural development policies designed to ensure the reproduction of the labour power);
- (ii) control the natural resources of the nation (through nationalization and through the technological and financial control necessary for their exploitation);
- (iii) exercise authority over the fiscal basis of the state;
- (iv) control the commodity market (by protecting the domestic market and trying to obtain access to foreign markets);
- (v) control sectoral technologies applied to industrial branches.

Given the above steps taken as an ensemble within a nation-building project, agricultural surpluses will, no doubt, be channelled towards accumulation for industrialization. Industrialization will also be aimed at satisfying the demands of the home-market, thus there will be a "healthy articulation" between agriculture and industry. This is not to mean that such a policy is aimed at autarky; on the contrary; it is aimed at building a self-reliant economy. But in order to initiate the building of such an economy, an industrializing social force within the state, a ruling class that is truly a national bourgeoisie, must be present. Whether it is possible for such a bourgeoisie to emerge in Africa today, and whether it can control state power as well as fight "decisive battles" so as to establish relations of production in society that become the bedrock of such an industrialization process, must, no doubt, continue to be central to our discussion on the agrarian future of Africa.

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6. See S. Amin "Nation-Building or Transnationalization?" Mimeo, Dakar, Senegal, 1981