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A
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The African Predicament

A STUDY IN THE PATHOLOGY OF MODERNISATION

~~BASICALLY RACIST & FULL OF MISFEAR~~

~~DON'T WASTE YOUR TIME.~~

AFRICAN SOCIALISM

1970



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Liberia which is the worst governed country in Africa. In its economic aspects the essence of neo-colonialism is the combination of a rapacious, dictatorial and proliferating ruling clique enmeshed in a vicious circle of exploitation and strife, with a laissez-faire capitalism, tamed neither by any democratic forces nor even by a bureaucracy guided by *raison d'état*, and operating under the conditions of insecurity which make a socially beneficent conduct of business unprofitable or perhaps even impossible.

The foreign businessmen cannot be blamed for making Africa poor for without them the aggregate wealth would have been even smaller than it is. The problem of neo-colonialism is not that of a giant conspiracy to rob Africa: for the reasons already indicated such an attempt would be much less profitable than a participation in a more rapidly growing market. Metaphorically speaking, it is a problem of elephants in rickety china shops. The big foreign firms can upset the traditional way of life and aggravate the vices of the indigenous elite, but they have no power to create a well-ordered and prosperous state. Anyway, they feel that their business is making money, not state-building or social reform.

Chapter 14 AFRICAN SOCIALISM

It may not be entirely accidental that the two frankest books on the obstacles to progress in Africa have been written by Frenchmen: René Dumont and Albert Meister.* Having been less addicted to racial contempt in the past, the French seem now to be less prone than the English to fall over backwards into an inverted racialism according to which nothing African must ever be criticised. Despite their realism in analysing the present situation, the two authors recommend 'African socialism' (administered by the 'pure and hard' according to Dumont's specification) as a cure for Africa's ills.

When following in the footsteps of Fourier and Proudhon, Marx and Engels were preaching the coming of the workers' paradise, they could only imagine what might be the effect of abolishing private property. In fact they did not even bother to draw any plans for the future socialist social order, and concentrated on analysing the workings of capitalism and castigating its iniquities. It is precisely because (in contrast to other prophets of socialism) they have left a blank cheque that they can be used as patron saints of a social order which negates their ideals, as can be seen by anybody who looks at what they have written about such things as censorship or bureaucracy. A hundred years ago, however, even a great mind could underestimate the dangers of bureaucracy and fail to realise that in large human aggregates communal property must remain a legal fiction covering the reality of the control by the officials. In the second half of the twentieth century, and with the sad experiences of eastern Europe staring us in the face, the belief that the so-called 'national planning and control over wealth' *must* bring about a just and

* *L'Afrique Noire est Mal Partie*: René Dumont, Collections Esprit, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1962. Published in London by André Deutsch Ltd, under the title *False Start in Africa*.

L'Afrique peut-elle Partir?: Albert Meister, Collections Esprit, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1966.

prosperous society amounts to a doctrinaire blindness camouflaging the desire to boss people around.

As P. T. Bauer puts it:*

'The possible, and indeed likely, increase in the inequality of power seems an important and little explored aspect of an increase in the role of government in economic life. For various institutional reasons, such as the absence of a well-informed and effective public opinion and the differences in effectiveness between the urban and the rural population in many underdeveloped countries, this range of problems is of special importance in the underdeveloped world. But its relevance is wider. For instance, measures designed to promote greater equality in conventionally measured income and wealth may result in greater inequality of power among members of a society, notably in greatly increased power of some individuals or groups over others. This is obscured by the habit of regarding inequality of wealth as commensurate with inequality of power, notably as indicating the ability of some individuals to control others. In fact, freedom from control or dictation is a function of access to independent alternatives, and not of equality of wealth or incomes conventionally measured.'

A collectivist economic system would work in Africa even worse than it does in Europe. Actually, as things stand at present, it could not work at all; and even the diluted versions which have been tried in Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Tanzania and Congo-Brazzaville have remained legal fictions adorning a kleptocratic reality. Kleptocracy as a system of government consists precisely of the practice of selling what the law forbids to sell: appointments, diplomas, government contracts, public employees' time and so on; and so long as venality persists money reigns supreme. Nor is there any evidence that totalitarianism constitutes an infallible cure for venality and that there can be no such thing as totalitarian kleptocracy. After all, with the waning of the remainders of revolutionary fanaticism and the elimination of terror, venality is reviving in Russia; and the unleashing of the Red Guards is probably Mao's desperate attempt to prevent a revival of corruption in China. In Poland practically everybody takes part in illicit trade

* *Economic Analysis and Policy in Underdeveloped Countries*: pp. 124-5, P. T. Bauer, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1965.

in objects secretly produced or removed from state-owned establishments.

In the revised 1966 edition of his path-breaking book (*L'Afrique Noire est Mal Partie*) pp. 205-14, René Dumont more or less recants his advocacy of socialist system for Africa in the chapter called 'Premature Socialism', in which he assesses the situation in Guinea and Mali as follows (the rather free translation and arrangement is mine):

'In Mali the plan was too ambitious, for the government had neither the finances and material means, nor the organisation, nor the personnel required for its realisation. . . . the administrative personnel for which they budgeted was excessive . . . and the people were reluctant to make the necessary effort.

'The Mali leaders, and above all the officials, in dealing with the peasants, simply give orders just as did the colonial administrators. . . . Therefore no extensive change has been achieved in the attitude of the peasants, whose interest in innovation and technical progress remains largely dormant. The bureaucracy in Bamako is too remote from the realities and the daily life of the bush. . . . Resources allocated on a national level are, all too often, considerably diminished as they pass down through the different administrative levels. . . .

'In 1965, the 35 nationalised concerns showed a deficit of more than 5 million C.F.A. francs. Le Somieux, a national import and export firm, showed losses comparable to the aggregate of the profits of the private companies which it had replaced. . . .

'Samir Amin was right in emphasising that there was less corruption in Mali than in Guinea and Ghana. Nonetheless, the quarter which the Bamako people call "Ministerial" is ornamented with villas built with public loans. Shops gradually become emptier, millet fetches a high price on the black market. . . .

'The Guinean failure is a more severe blow for the future of Africa than the Mali difficulties. For this time it is a question of a rich coastal country, with supplies of bauxite and hydro-electricity. Its agricultural exports, especially bananas and coffee, have rapidly declined, while the food shortages are becoming increasingly widespread. Only the Fria aluminium factory,

which is controlled by foreign trusts, makes a profit. It is American aid which is now preventing Guinean bankruptcy; but America is merely holding the country's head just above water, without really contributing towards its development. . . .

'To nationalise foreign commerce presupposes the existence of officials capable of efficiently and honestly organising the nationalised concerns. Ameillon (an African writer killed in Cameroun) regards Guinean administrators as "very mediocre" with only "very rare exceptions", and describes "the golden rain", that is to say, big salaries with exceedingly large allowances and free accommodation, for the new princes of the regime. Why does his analysis suddenly come to an end when the question of the complete failure of the nationalised firms arises? . . . For the answer would permit us to define more precisely the practical and economic limits of nationalisation at the present moment. These limits are defined above all by the ability and more especially by the honesty of the staff. . . .

'The Guineans (the products of the French system of higher education) thought that it would be possible with the aid of modern equipment to surpass the rate of Chinese growth, while working much less. . . . Such a tempo of development would require, in Africa, a constraint superior to that of the Stalin era, or of the Chinese "great leap forward": which can hardly be recommended for Africa, in view of its dubious success in China. For the human environment presents problems far more difficult than does the natural environment.

'The only guests in Israel, all expenses paid for two months, who refused to work for a week on a kibbutz, were the young Africans. . . .

'In Tanzania, the students went on strike when they were required to sleep two to a room. In Hungary, students sleep in eights; there, the Africans protested as well.'

Venerable experts keep telling us that private enterprise has brought damage rather than benefits to the poor countries, and that what they need is socialist planning, although it should be obvious that under kleptocracy planning is impossible. To be exact, planning as a paper exercise is not only perfectly feasible but also great fun—what is impossible is to carry out such plans when the officials disregard the instructions and sell their

decisions to the highest bidder. A striking case of the unreality of planning as everything but a façade was the much-trumpeted Seven-Year Development Plan in Ghana, which bore no factual relation to anything actually done by the government and was regarded with utter cynicism by officials working for the Planning Commission itself. The choice open to the African countries is not between central planning and free enterprise, but between an open and a clandestine pursuit of gain.

Even without venality the sheer inefficiency would be enough to rule out effective planning.* Speaking of Kenya, N. S. Carey Jones says:

'The trends tending to weaken the economy far outweigh those likely to strengthen it, and are likely to be accelerated as all the divisive and disruptive forces from outside are given full play. The possibility of the country attaining sustained economic growth seems remote and the probability is that the economy will gradually decline. It is a matter for speculation how far the decline in medical services and health services will offset this by keeping population growth within bounds. If it does not then there is a future for most people of increasing impoverishment, although, of course, many Africans will be richer. As statistics (and colonial statistics were notably poor) get poorer some of the problems of government . . . will disappear. If you do not have information you do not know what problems you have to tackle or how to do it. Who now knows or, indeed, cares, whether the population of the Congo is increasing or decreasing, the people getting poorer or richer, as the Kasavubu-Tshombe triangle is formed and re-formed, and foreign interference ensures that no stable policy can be worked out? . . . As impoverishment increases, so the material available for both foreign subversion and for dissident or power-seeking individuals is increased and made more inflammable . . . with the potential for growth which existed under colonial rule turned into a decline; nature taking its toll of human life as it did in the past until a new equilibrium is reached at a lower level. This would be masked by foreign aid, foreign technical assistance and slowed down by them. . . .

* The same problem in the Latin American (especially Cuban) context is examined in *Parasitism and Subversion*.

Independence came at a greater speed than that generated by internal causes, because of outside influences and Britain's world policies; i.e., Britain's attempts to meet outside influences in its much weaker post-war condition. The same outside influences will not leave Africa alone. . . . The one-party state, like foreign aid, is a check to the unstable influences, but they can still work within it, while foreign aid from too many sources will give outside influences a chance to cause disruption and confusion under official protection. It seems probable that the newly independent countries will fall under Communist control, particularly Chinese.' (*The Anatomy of Uhuru*: p. 207.)

The more enlightened and less hypocritical advocates of socialism for Africa would agree that the existing administrative machines could not direct a centrally controlled economy. What they hope for is a revolution like the Chinese which would bring to power dedicated and incorruptible puritans. Such views raise two questions: the first being whether such a solution is feasible, and the second whether it would be desirable. To begin with the second, I can simply state my opinion that it would amount to jumping from the frying pan into the fire. Viewed against the background of the terrible age-long oppression and misery of the Chinese masses, the present regime may be regarded as an improvement or at least as no worse than the preceding. In contrast the substantial majority of the inhabitants of Africa south of the Sahara are still quite far from having reached equal depths of degradation. Though poor, very few of them are actually starving, and most remain gay and more vivacious than the denizens of northern welfare states. It may be said that this is a matter of temperament; nonetheless, nobody can be vivacious who is badly undernourished and lives in the fear of the lash—and it is important to remember in this context that the majority of the African peasants still live in free village or pastoral communities without landlords or usurers or policemen. One could well claim that the life of a Somali camelherd is freer, more interesting and satisfying than that of a clerk in London, but nobody can doubt that it is better to be a bored clerk than a drudge labouring to point of exhaustion under the fear of starvation or a lash. If we take laughter and merriment as indications of happiness, we must conclude that

in most of tropical Africa things are not yet too bad, and that its inhabitants are a great deal happier than ordinary Indians, Ibero Americans, Arabs or Europeans—although the unhappiness of many of the latter must be attributed to isolation, insecurity and nervousness engendered by the rat-race rather than to material privations.

No totalitarianism could make the fate of the Indian or Peruvian peasant worse than it is; and bullied, poor and exhausted as he is the Chinese peasant probably fares better under the Communists than before. In Africa, however, the acute sufferers from tyranny and rapacity still constitute a minority; and therefore a replacement of the present venal and ineffectual rulers by totalitarian fanatics would substantially augment the sum of human suffering. Unfortunately, if the present combination of ultra-rapid population growth with economic stagnation persists, it will impoverish and degrade the African poor to such an extent that like their Indian or Arab equivalents they will have nothing to lose.

At the present juncture in Africa, the undesirability of a totalitarian solution coincides with the difficulty of applying it. Detribalisation has not yet gone far enough to produce a large mass of rootless individuals who might yearn for integration into a para-military party of ideologues. The persisting solidarity of the clan, which makes it impossible to get the administration to function in accordance with the laws and the ideals of impersonal efficiency, also prevents the development of efficient and fanaticised party machines, capable of imposing totalitarianism. Owing to the invertebrate character of the states, a communist system could be set up through infiltration with secret agents, and with the aid of bribery, intimidation or armed force, if the big communist powers had a free hand in Africa. But this would amount to communist crypto or not-so-crypto colonialism—government by puppets put into power and maintained there by external force.

The ruling graduates have acquired the taste for the socialist phraseology during their studies in Paris or London because the socialists, and above all the communists, were the only Europeans who favoured the cause of African independence before granting it became imminent and took trouble to befriend lonely African students. The ideology itself has never acquired the power to move the masses; and even the founder of Africa's first socialist dictator-

ship—Sekou Touré—derives more sustenance for his power from the reverence felt by the masses for his royal blood than from the appeal of his Marxist slogans. In so far as such slogans have any appeal, it stems from the tradition of passivity towards the government and the habit of expecting it to do everything. Hopeful expectations of true paternalism bear a good testimony to the character of the British and French colonial rule but they constitute another impediment to the development of voluntary associations in addition to ethnic divisions.

As mentioned earlier, for Nkrumah the chief attraction of the socialist model was the illusion that it offered a short cut to industrial and military power. The disastrous failure of his attempt can partly be attributed to his personal shortcomings: firstly, his megalomania which prompted him to discard honest and competent advisers, and to listen only to sycophantic quacks and secret agents; secondly, his lack of administrative skill; and thirdly, his insincerity and failure to give a good example—for while preaching socialism and dedication, he was a highly successful practitioner of capitalism who had accumulated a substantial fortune.

His whimsical decisions made a consistent economic policy, let alone detailed planning, quite out of the question while the cult of personality and the crazy ideological hodgepodge aggravated the loss of the sense of reality. Consequently even the few real and important additions to Ghana's productive equipment made under his rule cannot bear much fruit for want of integration with the rest of the economy. True, the catastrophic fall in the price of cocoa to less than half of its 1953 level has seriously undermined Ghana's economy, and can be blamed for the ensuing bankruptcy, but a policy must be judged by its adaptation to the actual situation—not to what might have been—and the fact remains that Ivory Coast which has suffered just as much from this price drop, has weathered the shock much better because of realistic economic policy which ensured a continuation of French help. One of the main reasons why the Soviet economic model cannot succeed in small countries is precisely their dependence on foreign trade.

In their recent book in Polish on *Socialism and the Modernisation of Africa*, S. Chodak and J. Kleer come to the conclusion—a remarkable one for members of the communist party—that tropical Africa is not ripe for socialism. Even more remarkable

is their claim that neither is China, also based on a reference to Marx's view that a full development of the capitalist form of production must precede the advent of socialism—which is exactly how Karl Kautsky tried to explain why the revolution in Russia has produced terror instead of socialism. Despite their Marxist inurement to woolliness, our authors rightly find Senghor's sermons on African Socialism completely vacuous.

In comparison with the other African governments aspiring to socialism, however, Nkrumah enjoyed the great advantage of being able to start with much greater assets, and of having at his disposal a much larger and better educated administrative personnel. Even if Nyerere is free from megalomania, hypocrisy and the lack of the sense of reality, which bedevilled Nkrumah's rule, and is more willing to learn from experience, his personal virtues cannot compensate for the complete absence in Tanzania of skills and habits required for operating a centrally planned economy.

Where the government is in the hands of natives but the capital belongs to foreigners, an ideology advocating the state ownership of the means of production naturally appeals to nationalist sentiments. This partly explains why state-capitalism has been set up in Burma and Egypt, and why communism and nationalism reinforce each other in Latin America, and why anti-big-capitalist semi-fascism was much in vogue in Poland before the war.* The low motivating power of socialist and communist ideologies in Africa is largely due to weakness of nationalism because a stronger feeling of national solidarity would enhance the appeal of the idea of confiscating the foreigners' possessions. Though weak, this factor is by no means entirely absent, but in any case the sheer and short-sighted cupidity of the rulers provides a sufficient motive for expropriations. No matter how ruinous in the long run—no matter how incapable is the government of managing the establishments which it acquires—a forced purchase normally brings profit to somebody.

On the East Coast, especially in Tanzania, African socialism furnishes the justification for the attempts to despoil and drive out the Indian traders, and to replace them with a bureaucratically controlled distribution under the guise of co-operatives; just as national socialism provided a perfect formula for anti-semitism

* See on this point, *National Characteristics of Fascism*: ed. Stewart Woolf, Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

in central Europe, because the Jews (like the Indians in East Africa) could be condemned from a nationalistic point of view as aliens, and from a socialist standpoint as capitalists. In Zanzibar racialist socialism provided the slogans for exterminating the Arab mercantile master-race which has been oppressing their African slaves for centuries. The Indian traders on the mainland have never been the ruling caste, but their wealth and notions of superiority, coupled with numerical and political weakness make them into an ideal scapegoat for collective frustrations, apart from being the object of envy. The policy of replacing Indian traders by African public employees finds much favour with the candidates for office, but whether it will benefit the peasants is more than doubtful, because having a machine of coercion at their disposal, the kleptocrats can fleece their victims much better than politically powerless alien usurers.

During the final correction of the present chapter the news has come that the Tanzanian government has decided to expropriate the banks and the bigger trading companies—although unspecified compensation has been promised to their foreign or Asian-descended owners. If the Asians are excluded Tanzania has no personnel capable of managing banks or other kinds of big business. Furthermore, as the Africans will not entrust their money to their compatriots unless they are their kinsmen—least of all to people connected with the government against whom they can get no redress in a court of law—this measure cannot fail to bring about a complete disappearance of private deposits, a reversion to hoarding of gold and foreign currency, and consequently a drastic reduction of the already miserable private saving and investment. For a few months, however, this step will enhance Nyerere's prestige in the eyes of the populace who imagine that the premises of the banks contain inexhaustible wealth which will make them all rich. Perhaps Nyerere is resorting to such short-sighted demagoguery in order to stave off a military revolt, but this will not help him much in the long run unless (like, for instance, Duvalier in Haiti or Somoza in Nicaragua) he builds a dependable terror machine which will be all the more necessary when the aroused hopes of material improvement are irretrievably disappointed. The recent purges indicate that he is sliding rapidly towards terror.

Nyerere has many merits. In contrast to other rulers of Africa (or for that matter of other continents too) he is not addicted to

ostentation and dresses simply and (what is important) in a sensible fashion appropriate to the climate. He has had the courage to admonish repeatedly his paladins for their parasitic proclivities, and even to reduce their salaries. What is more, he has even dared to criticise the African men in general for their inclination to leave all the work to women. It is all the more pity, therefore, that he has not been able to free himself from the socialist superstitions learned in Britain. He should know that, in spite of the fact that there is less corruption in Tanzania than on the West Coast (owing to the greater prevalence of village self-sufficiency) the newly established co-operatives are as riddled with bribery and embezzlement as any public institution in Africa.

Africa is not the only part of the world where a lot of people are attracted by socialism or communism mainly because they promise a massive multiplication of public posts. In Africa, however, apart from the desire for the foreigners' possessions, this motive is almost the only one because of the absence of the components of proletarian protest, due to the ethnic divisions and inarticulateness among the poor. At least in the former British colonies, moreover, one gets the impression that the ordinary Africans like the expatriate capitalists better than the bureaucrats of their own race, although this preference does not seem to extend to the Asians. This feeling stems not from any kind of masochism but from simple knowledge that the colonial officers were juster and more benevolent than their indigenes heirs, and that with very few exceptions the expatriate businessmen treat their employees very much better than do the native employers or officials.