Interpreting Africa's Crisis: Political Science versus Political Economy

Mick Moore

Introduction

The January 1986 number of the *IDS Bulletin*, entitled 'Developmental States and African Agriculture', is concerned with the political dimensions of the current economic crisis of agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa (see Appendix). The nature of that economic crisis has been discussed in detail elsewhere, including previous numbers of the *IDS Bulletin* (vol 14 no 1 and vol 16 no 3), and need not be debated further here. The context and tone of the political analysis in this recent *Bulletin* (henceforth 'the collection') is conveyed by Gordon White in his editorial preface: 'the conclusion which emerges from these papers, and from the discussions which gave rise to them, is that the impact of government policies on agricultural performance has in general been highly problematic, where not disastrous' (pp 1-2). This all sounds very familiar. Indeed, White then goes on to say that, 'In terms of conclusions ... there is substantial agreement with the prevailing conventional wisdom'. This is the point of my first criticism of the collection: that it does not really advance us beyond conventional wisdom. However, this conventional wisdom is itself shot through with ambiguity and possible contradiction, and therefore fails to provide clear guidelines for feasible political routes out of sub-Saharan Africa's economic crisis. One would have hoped that the collection would have yielded a clearer explanation of these ambiguities. This would at least help shape the academic research agenda and, perhaps more importantly, introduce a little more circumspection into confident pronouncements about what 'Africa really needs'.

My second criticism is analogous and closely related. Just as it fails to explore the contradictory elements within conventional wisdom, the collection does not clearly delineate the differences between the different basic approaches to the analysis of political phenomena which it itself embodies. Much less does it explore the extent to which these differences are complementary or compatible. There is in fact in the collection a misleading sense of unity, harmony and complementarity — misleading because based more on code and attitude than on substantive content. The pillars on which this apparent coherence is constructed include:

(a) some rather grand promises, not always fully honoured, about the analytic potency of some rather weakly-specified version of political science or, more frequently, political economy;

(b) the repetition of what appears to me to be a rather elementary point — that public policy is inherently political (e.g. p 1 (x2), p 2, p 5, p 39, pp 64-65);

(c) recurring expressions of solidarity in opposition to the works of the two dreaded B's — (Robert) Bates and the (World) Bank[1] (e.g. pp 5-11, p 22, p 30, p 44);

(d) an insistence, not always fully justified, on the analytic complexity of issues.

The most fundamental question arising from this collection concerns the capacity of any variant of social science to deal in a satisfactory manner with such holistic meta-phenomena as the simultaneous political and economic decline of nation states. I limit my contribution to a slightly less ambitious question: how far can *political economy*, as opposed to *political science*, help explain[2] the political dimensions of sub-Saharan Africa's current crisis? In order to answer that question one has to clarify the differences between two very different types of political economy, only one of which is properly represented in the collection.

The following section is devoted to some elaboration of what I see as the ambiguities in conventional wisdom about contemporary sub-Saharan Africa (henceforth Africa). Attention then turns to the question of political science versus political economy

[1] However, connoisseurs of the World Bank-Sussex debate on Africa [e.g. IBRD 1981 and 1984: *IDS Bulletin* vol 14 no 1 and vol 16 no 3: Sender and Smith 1984] will probably have noted that, with the solé and prominent exception of Manfred Bienefeld, the contributors to this collection appear, at least as judged by lack of vehement protestations to the contrary, to make considerable concessions to what has generally been seen as the 'World Bank position': that the causes of the economic crisis are to an important degree bad public policies which are generated internally within individual African states.

[2] I am aware that the notion of what constitutes satisfactory explanation within social science is a much debated and contested issue. My minimal definition would be: a plausible, detailed and empirically-validated reconstruction of the interaction of the various factors leading to Africa's current crisis. A model of this process which led to accurate predictions about the future — or, at least, to the construction of a narrow range of likely scenarios — would of course be much better, but perhaps a little demanding.

IDS Bulletin, 1987, vol 18 no 4, Institute of Development Studies, Sussex

and to a critique of the four individual papers in the collection which are principally relevant to this, I then review the four main papers dealing with broad conceptual or theoretical issues, before going on to focus more directly on the issue of the appropriateness of different variants of political science/political economy.

Economic Decline, Political Decay

The opinion pollsters have not honoured *IDS Bulletin* readers with an enquiry into their views of the causes of Africa's current problems. I therefore feel free to impose my own definition of conventional wisdom. Leaving aside for the moment the question of the relative importance of external factors, conventional wisdom, I suggest, comprises two basic diagnoses:

(1) The 'exploitation diagnosis' has many variants, but all boil down to the notion that relatively small groups of politicians/bureaucrats/soldiers have used their control of the state to expand the scope of state control over the economy and plunger the economy for private benefit.[3]

(2) The 'incapacity diagnosis' claims, as White says in his introduction to the collection, not that African states 'are overweening but over-weak and vulnerable' (p 3). He goes on to talk of 'the failure to develop strong political organisations capable of accomplishing the characteristic tasks of political development: the capacity to mobilise popular commitment and support, work out and maintain stable rules of the political game, unify contending political forces, define and implement coherent policy programmes, enforce the will of political leaderships on recalcitrant bureaucracies, and integrate their national constituencies across regions and between centre and periphery'.

This latter concern with breakdown/non-establishment of political order has long been prominent in conservative political thought in Europe, and within development studies has become associated with the work of Samuel Huntington [1968], and his view that more government generally means better government. This perspective is likely to be endorsed wholeheartedly by for example, the Permanent Secretary of an African Ministry of Agriculture. His only usable information about the size of the maize harvest is a fragmentary series of impressionistic reports from district officers which contrast 'eyeball' estimates of current production with some assumed 'average'. He cannot ship improved seeds out to the districts because the railway is operating at a fraction of capacity and the few trucks still on the road cannot operate profitably at government hire rates. He cannot get through to his regional officers on the telephone. He cannot find half of his staff on any work day and cannot blame them for their absences or peculations because their official salaries have been severely eroded by inflation, etc.

There is clearly a degree of contradiction between the two diagnoses identified above. The exploitation diagnosis implies elements of state strength, while the incapacity diagnosis suggests the opposite. As the quotation above indicates, Gordon White in his introduction perceives this contradiction. The collection contains papers which explore both routes to explanation. Of the four papers 'dealing with broad analytical issues' (p 1), Teddy Brett sets off along 'exploitation avenue', and Theo Mars cruises down 'incapacity road'. Yet the two routes are not consistently compared or evaluated.

Yet the problem is not that these contradictory images of strong and weak states are irreconcilable. We should not allow ourselves to be misled by such grand abstractions. The vocabulary and conceptual apparatus available to handle these issues is severely stunted. There are a wide range of possible referents for the terms 'strong' and 'weak' states. Allow also for a little historical process and one could fairly easily construct a plausible intepretation of the recent history of an African state which says, for example, that in period A and in senses P and Q, the state was strong, but that external events and internal contradictions led to a situation in period B . . .

No, the problem is not one of artificial dichotomies, but rather that there are a variety of possible interpretations of broad concepts such as 'state power' and a range of feasible causal links between the associated variables. Let me list a few examples or hypotheses:

(1) The state is simultaneously strong in the sense that the state sector comprises a large proportion of the national economy, weak in the sense that the political leadership lacks legitimacy (i.e. a capacity to command obedience) among its citizens, strong in the sense that the public sector bureaucracy is the only cohesive and organised group in national politics, and weak in the sense that certain regional groups are disaffected and secessionist because excluded from this bureaucracy.

(2) The bureaucratic class is predatory either for cultural and historical reasons — the failure to develop a sense of nationhood and of obligation and duty to country — or simply because of the absence of any class or class coalition able and motivated to exercise countervailing power against the normal predatory inclinations of public bureaucracies.

(3) Ordinary citizens are ill-inclined to trust or obey state officials, either because of deeply-rooted

[3] In the extreme cases, such as Uganda, there was a shift from this indirect kind of plunder to something more literal.

'failures' to construct a national political system and culture in the colonial and immediate post-colonial period (tribalism and all that) or because very recent experience reveals that state officials, and thus by extension the state itself, are purely and simply self-interested.

(4) For any or all of a range of reasons, including those listed in (1)-(3) above and also because of (a) external factors and (b) the simple misleading of African governments by statist inclined left-wing expatriate advisers and academics, things began to go wrong in the economy and governments found themselves progressively unable to halt the slide as fewer and fewer typewriters remained in working order, more and more telephones fell into disrepair, fewer goods could be shifted on the road and railway, more officials went about without leave more often to try to seek alternative livelihoods, etc.

So many of these hypotheses sound terribly plausible once one has decided that there is a basic politico-economic decline. How does one evaluate them? The answer does seem to matter. For, as the authors of the collection made clear (p 2), the liberal, market-oriented policies being pressed upon most African countries by their aid donors and international bankers frequently require strong (authoritative) governments to sack public officials or increase consumer food prices without incurring equivalent off-setting expenditure on the military or on repairing riot damage. There are indeed currently some indications — more concretely from Ghana and Zambia, but perhaps also from Tanzania — that the state legitimacy engendered by a history of some kind of radicalism is becoming almost a pre-condition for effective adoption of IMF-approved structural adjustment and liberal economic reforms. *Any* economic policy advocacy should be based on reliable judgments about various dimensions of state power and capacity.

Political Science and Political Economy

Bienefeld on Bates

Robert Bates is a political scientist from the new political economy/neoclassical political economy/ rational choice/public choice school which has blossomed and flourished in faculties of political science *and* economics in the USA over the past decade or so. The central feature of neoclassical political economy is that it attempts to explore political behaviour through the paradigm and methods of neoclassical ('conventional') economics. The building blocks of this method are individual political actors (individuals, households, enterprises, etc.) who have choices open to them and who rationally use their resources to pursue material ends in the political arena. To comment further on the school at a general level would be to invite controversy. For not only does it generate strong opposition from adherents of other approaches to political economy [Staniland 1985:Ch 3], but there is a wide diversity within the school itself, with different practitioners trying to modify the approach to meet almost every kind of criticism [Colander ed. 1984]. To a greater degree than most of his fellows, Bates is explicitly concerned with the phenomena of inequality and coercion and with the institutions and organisations through which these phenomena are perpetuated and individual choices both aggregated and constrained. He 'seems to stand halfway between the rational choice school and the institutionalist school of economics' [Staniland 1985:61].

Bates' work comprises an analysis of the effect of coalition-building on the formation of economic policy in tropical Africa [Bates 1981 and 1983, Ch 6]. Central to his analysis is the assumption that individuals implicitly apply a material benefit-cost calculus to their involvement in politics, becoming 'political' only when the expected benefit-cost ratio is positive, and channelling their political activities to achieve the highest return. Bates applies this method on a deductive basis to the politics determining public policies affecting the three markets in which African farmers mainly operate — markets for farm inputs, farm products, and consumer goods. A key, and plausible, intermediate deduction from his method is that ordinary peasant farmers are likely to obtain little or no benefit from involving themselves in attempts to influence these markets through politics. For the costs of engagement are relatively high and the potential benefits low. For industrial enterprises and state bureaucrats the opposite holds. By traversing a road which is straightforward but too long to be summarised here, Bates concludes that his model actually predicts the pattern of economic policy generally observed in Africa. Well-organised urban, industrial and bureaucratic interests ensure that governments bias prices in their favour and against those of ordinary small farmers in all three markets. Small material concessions are made to large farmers to discourage them from identifying themselves with the rest of the rural population and challenging the way the cake is distributed.

A key point about Bates' work is that it falls *logically* into two very distinct parts. Almost all his effort, as judged by the number of words, is devoted to exploring and explaining the political coalitions which underlie characteristic patterns of economic policy. It is irrelevant to my critique of Bienefeld-on-Bates whether or not I believe Bates to have been successful in this endeavour. As it happens, I, like Gordon White (p 2), simultaneously find a great deal of value in Bates' work and believe the rational choice approach to political analysis which he exemplifies to be inherently limited and limiting (see below). The

important consideration at this point is that Bates' attempt to explain the politics behind economic policy is logically quite separate from the other component of his analysis: the simple, if not simplistic, assumption that it is these economic policies which have brought on Africa's current economic crisis. And the key point about Bienefeld's article is that he fails or refuses to make this distinction between explaining politics and explaining economic performance.

One might well object that such a distinction is somehow invalid or naive: that one cannot separate Bates' political analysis from the broader 'free market' economic policy paradigm or message behind it. I would be the first to agree (a) that Bates tends to present his assumptions about the malign effect of political intervention on economic performance as self-evident; and (b) that this stance is characteristic of his neoclassical political economy paradigm. Indeed, one could go further. Much of the stimulus behind the recent flowering of at least one major branch of neoclassicial political economy lay in a perceived need to strengthen the intellectual foundations of conventional (neoclassical) general equilibrium theory. Empirical evidence was beginning to suggest that the welfare costs of governmental 'distortions' of competitive markets were actually very small, throwing into serious doubt the core doctrines of neoclassical economics. The reaction was 'rent-seeking theory' which said, once again on purely deductive basis, that, even if the direct welfare costs of 'policy distortions' were small, what about the enormous resources indirectly wasted as people organised and competed politically to persuade government to intervene in the economy in their favour? [Colander 1984:4-5].

In terms of history, paradigm and academic factionalism, there is indeed an affinity between neoclassical economics — and thus the predisposition in favour of economic liberalism — and Bates' rational choice approach to political analysis. Bienefeld is happy to conflate the two, and to dismiss Bates' attempts to explain 'the politics of Africa's policies' (p 5) with the same broad brush — bearing the label 'political economy' (p 5) but lacking precise specifications — that he more appropriately wields to question Bates' non-treatment of external causes of Africa's problems and to throw doubt on the adequacy of Bates' assumptions about how a good economic policy would look. In the process Bienefeld participates, knowingly or unknowingly, in one of academia's undeclared little wars. This is the conflict between (a) the neoclassicial political economists whose basic approach is an off-shoot of neo-classical economics, and whose central concerns are voluntaristic, individual, rational choice and the possibilities of trading-off competing interests and (b) social scientists like Bienefeld whose political economy has its roots in classical economics and Marxism and whose central concerns are the functioning of total social systems, class, exploitation, coercion and conflict. The object and prize is sole and undisputed possession of the terrain labelled 'political economy'.

Once he had been persuaded to treat it as it logically merits — i.e. separately from appropriate economic policies — what should Bienefeld have said about Bates' political analysis? A full answer would require too much space.[4] Bienefeld should certainly have drawn attention to the limited, problematic and artificial nature of the assumptions that the sole objectives of political action are individual material gain and that individuals are rational in the pursuit of this objective.[5] The importance of symbolic and affective — as opposed to rational-material — action in politics should be self-evident. Rational choice theory is also inherently biased in favour of voluntaristic explanations of political action, devaluing the significance of coercion. And it can at best assume — and never really attempt to explain — the shape of society or its major institutions.

Some of the limitations of neoclassical political economy are particularly germane to the analysis of Africa's current situation, and are of special interest because they are in some degree generic to all variants of political economy, neoclassical, classical or Marxian.

One is that the political economy method is only really capable of dealing with the question of how different social groups (classes, coalitions, interest groups or whatever) use politics to capture the state apparatus in order to influence the distribution of material resources. The application of political economy *assumes* the existence of the state apparatus itself, and therefore *assumes away* what some observers believe to be a (or the) key question about contemporary Africa: the non-existence/decay of the material and/or cultural preconditions for the effective functioning of national governments.

All political economy, but most explicitly neoclassical political economy, assumes that instrumental, rational materialism is the sole motivator of political action. It therefore has nothing to say — or, worse, to ask — about the possible effects of culture on politics. You are wasting your time if you ask a political economist how to begin to determine whether Africa's crisis is rooted in aspects of political culture.

Finally, you are also wasting your time if you ask a

[4] For a rapid critique see, for example, Staniland 1985: Chapter 3. For more detailed discussions of the roots of rational choice theory see for example Barry 1970; Heath 1976.

[5] The notion of rational, individual political strategies raises questions about individual decision-making capacity and, even more, access to relevant information, which appear to me analytically and practically even more problematic than those raised by analagous assumptions within the neoclassical economics paradigm.

political economist about the circumstances under which (a) the President, Finance Minister and Central Bank Governor of a virtually 'bankrupt' African country will get together, say 'This all has to stop. It is simply impossible to carry on governing under these circumstances. The IMF are coming in tomorrow'; and (b) the population can be sufficiently persuaded that this diagnosis is indeed correct, such that IMF policies will be tolerated without riots. For political economy, exactly like the conventional, 'pluralist' approach to politics, is premised on the assumption that policies are the result of the competition and interaction of organised social groups. 'The state' can exist only as a neutral arena or, in the form of the state bureaucracy, as a specially-privileged social group. The notion of the state as an institution representing broader and more long term interests than those interests pursued by social groups is alien to political economy. Ask a political economist about the likely attitude of the President of Zambia to an IMF package, and the only answer he can legitimately provide *qua* political economist is couched in terms of the classes or interest groups, however defined, which the President is believed to represent. You will have to fall back on commonsense and/or political science for the rest of the story.[6]

For all these reasons the analytic tool which Bates offers us, although powerful, can only begin to explain why a certain general pattern of politics appeared in Africa at a particular stage in its history.[7] It could not, however powerfully concentrated and ably directed, provide us with a full account of the details of individual country cases. More importantly from the current policy point of view, rational choice theory does not seem to help us in advancing beyond our 'commonsense' observations about (a) the effects of political and/or economic decline on governmental capacity; and (b) the effects of the *perceptions* of decline, and of continual lectures from the World Bank *et al.*, on the political attitudes and actions of African political elites and masses.

I regard Bates' work in much the same way as I regard my garden hoe. The latter is a very useful tool, but my parsnips would be in a woeful state if it were the only tool in my garden shed. I feel much the same way about our Made-by-Bienefeld garden fork. It is excellent for some purposes, I need it as much as my hoe, but I never use it to weed the parsnips. And there are unfortunately all too many operations involving tender young plants for which none of my garden tools are suitable and only hands will do. In the same way, no amount of political economy, of whatever variant, can tell us all we wish to know about politics.

Mars on State Failure

Sandwiched as he is between political economists of both stripes, Theo Mars' genuine political science is very welcome. He focuses on that question of state capacity which lies outside the competence of political economy. Is there a real possibility that 'the African problem' is not that the state is in the hands of the 'wrong' interest groups/classes, and therefore does economically inefficient things with the resources at its command, but rather that the state fails in organisational and political terms and is unable to mobilise or distribute resources on anything like an adequate scale? Reading Mars' discussion of the recent African political science literature bearing on this issue, my initial feeling was that things were warming up. We seemed to be about to attempt the jump labelled 'Are African States Political Failures?' Then suddenly the horse shies off to one side and bolts back to the stable! For we are told that all these problems of the fragility of large scale organisations which have been observed in Africa are in fact endemic throughout the modern world. Large scale formal organisation and bureaucracy has failed us all. We Westerners look at Africa's political problems as pathologies, as deviations from the norm which are in some sense curable. Instead we should ponder the prospect that Africa is simply showing us the path along which we are all destined to limp! Whether and why Africa really is taking the lead along the path of organisational decay are questions left unanswered. Should we seek the causes of organisational decline in the *internal* contradictions and pathologies of large (state) organisations, or in their failure to generate popular support and legitimacy? A very useful question is raised, but I am not sure how one would go about beginning to seek answers.

Brett on Class and State Power

Teddy Brett's paper, entitled 'State Power and Economic Inefficiency: Explaining Political Failure in Africa', is the only one in the collection which attempts to explain in any extended and general fashion the central problem of the relationship between political power and poor economic per-

[6] It should be clear that I deny the title 'political economy' to that variant of social science, especially common within development studies, which insists that all economic and political variables are inter-related in any given case, but refuses to specify the way in which it assumes or hypothesises them to be related, ultimately falling back on *ad hoc* description [Staniland 1985:Chapter 1].

[7] My own hunch is that the rational choice method was so fruitful at explaining African politics and policies in Bates' skilled hands because it was applied to a period — the 1960s and 1970s — when some of its assumptions were more realistic than usual. In essence, the circumstances of decolonisation meant that there was an opportunity to reshape national politics because the board was relatively clean. National political cultures, structures and classes were but weakly formed. In a situation where politics was unusually weakly-determined by history and rooted institutions, the heuristic processes within rational choice theory through which individuals assess their material goals and then make the appropriate coalitions were less remote from reality than they are in normal circumstances.

formance in contemporary Africa. Unfortunately, it is also a little difficult to interpret, containing some ambiguity and apparent contradiction. One has to clarify a number of problems of style and method before one can begin to isolate and evaluate the substantive core of the argument.

The opening paragraph demonstrates in a rather concentrated form the kinds of ambiguities and infelicities of language which besprinkle the paper:

> Rural survival in Africa, as elsewhere, depends predominantly upon social rather than ecological factors once a division of labour between town and country has been established. The viability of the production process on the farm becomes a function of the external structures which manage the interaction between them; more especially, that of the agencies, public and private, which guarantee property rights, supply inputs and market outputs. While there is much evidence to suggest that farmers, even the poorest and most ill-educated, will maximise their output when conditions permit, it is equally clear that production will decline when these processes of mediation break down (p 22).

The first half of the first sentence is presumably not intended to preface or summarise some kind of statistical statement about the relative effects on mortality rates of changes in (a) weather or other ecological factors and (b) variables concerned with the social organisation of agriculture. It is 'code' — and admirably terse code — for 'I am a social scientist, and the things I deal in are clearly more important in this context than the things natural scientists deal in'. The (coded?) meaning of the second half of that sentence ('. . . once a division . . .') escapes me entirely. And the only sensible thing to do with farmers who attempt to 'maximise their output' is to treat them for sleeplessness or obsessional neurosis before they ruin themselves and their families.

These points of style are not always so inconsequential. What, for example, are we to make of the claim on p 23 that the two conventional interpretations of Africa's crisis — the World Bank-type belief that it is all traceable to too much state encroachment on the market and the neo-Marxist critique of the 'parasitic bureaucratic bourgeoisie' (p 22) — give us no 'real understanding' of the problem? It all depends of course what you mean by 'real'. Since, as is demonstrated below, Brett goes on to produce explanations which, *pace* his protestations, appear remarkably similar to those he dismisses, the question of what is a 'real' explanation does seem to matter, at least in the struggle to claim the honours of having properly, adequately and correctly grasped the total nature of the problem. Similar questions are raised by Brett's claim on p 23 that 'Weber's assertion that bureaucracy is, from a purely technical point of view, capable of attaining the highest degree of efficiency and is "the most rational known means of carrying out imperative control over human beings" has yet to be effectively disputed'. What contitutes 'effectively disputed'? Presumably not the kinds of argument advanced by Theo Mars (see above), with considerable intellectual and empirical backing, that large scale bureaucracies have grossly disappointed the Weberian expectation. But perhaps experience is not relevant? Does the key to Brett's dismissal of these Mars-type views lie in the phrase 'from a purely technical point of view'? If so, how then could one 'effectively dispute' the Weberian expectation? All trivial points, you might say. But it is important to establish that one is dealing with a scholar who implicitly claims a high degree of discretion to set the criteria by which alternative formulations are to be judged as serious, important or adequate.

Perhaps it is more realistic to talk of 'tactics' rather than 'style'. This is certainly the case with the discussion 'Bureaucracy and Peasantry', where we are treated to an exposé of the naivety of those who believed that in independent Africa the bureaucracy and national planning systems could deal in a technocratic and neutral way with an undifferentiated peasantry. Yes, of course, as Brett asserts, there were inequalities among the peasants. Of course some peasants benefited more from the state action than others. These things are always there and should not be forgotten. What I find difficult to understand in anything other than tactical terms is the repeated insistence, in a rather brief section, on the *political* nature of this process: 'intensely political struggle' . . . 'intensely political significance' . . . 'intensification of political conflict' . . . 'powerful political tensions' . . . 'tribal conflicts intensified and often violent separatist movements were common' (p 25). Why have similar or greater rural inequalities elsewhere not led to the same descending and destructive spiral of intensified political competition? These loud political scientists' growls about the politicalness of it all may well help frighten off other people and discourage them from claiming an understanding of the problem, but I am not sure that they otherwise contribute much.

Edging slowly towards more substantive issues, but keeping the term 'tactics' in mind, let us look a little more closely at Brett's demolition of alternative explanations of Africa's crisis. As already mentioned above, he feels that no 'real understanding' can be obtained from World Bank-type views about an excessively large state presence in the economy or from similar neo-Marxist concerns with a 'parasitic bureaucratic bourgeoisie'. The problem with the latter approach is that it is claimed to attribute 'overriding influence' to an 'all-powerful international bourgeoisie, thus excluding an autonomous role for domestic elements in the political struggle' (pp 22-23). What is Brett's alternative explanation? Let us take a few quotations from his concluding pages:

'. . . the structure of state intervention in the African context could have been expressly designed as a mechanism for primitive accumulation by the political and bureaucratic class' (p 28).

'. . . the political/bureaucratic class developed a vested interest in sustaining the price distortions which allowed them to control surpluses and use them to strengthen their economic and/or political power' (p 28).

'. . . the African evidence as to the irrationality of the great majority of bureaucractic decisions is overwhelming' (p 28).

'. . . a limited fraction of the aspirant petit bourgeoisie made substantial gains and translated them into immense wealth, but at the expense of the political integrity and economic coherence of the system as a whole' (p 28).

'. . . in many contexts the poor and middle peasantry would be better off if a substantial part of the state apparatus was dismantled and replaced by private enterprise, provided that the entrepreneurs concerned were subjected to market competition . . .' (p 29).

Admittedly, Brett has a slightly more sophisticated hypothesis/explanation about how this parasitic statism came about than can normally be found in those more conventional explanations which he rejects (see below). It is however difficult to detect any fundamental difference between his and these alternative explanations sufficiently great to justify the processes of polarisation in which Brett indulges. The notion of a 'parasitic bureaucracy' sums up all of them.

This penchant for magnifying small differences is even more evident in the discussion of alternative policy options. On p 23 Brett condemns as 'nationalistic anarchism' (and as impractical) the 'rejection of both market and bureaucratic solutions in favour of an ill-defined conception of democratic planning from below'. He rather believes in:

'the need for the creation of politically controlled structures for economic intervention which would meet the real needs of a community of small-scale producers of the African type. Clearly the Weberian bureaucratic model does not meet these needs. Instead we have to ask how far and in what ways control over these structures can be decentralised to the local level, and political and economic accountability enforced. Hence it may well be that cooperative and/or voluntary organisations supported by the state, organised in democratic principles . . .' (p 28).

If there is indeed a difference between a radical separatist feminist and a separatist radical feminist, it is presumably very important if you happen to be one or the other.

So, finally, how does Brett go about explaining Africa's problems? Well, he does find it useful to talk, as I have talked here, in terms of 'Africa', i.e. as if there were some general phenomena to be grasped, rather than a random coincidence of a range of national (or sub-national) political and economic failures. I am all in favour of that. Seekers after generalisation should be honoured as the standard-bearers of social science. However, no army can operate well if everyone becomes a standard-bearer. In order that we humble foot-soldiers should be able to do our best to follow and support the standard-bearers, it would be useful if the latter could give us some idea of the likely itinerary. What is the scientific status of Brett's argument? Is it more than a hypothesis? If so, how much evidence, and of what kind, is available? Where do we find it? To which parts of Africa is his stylised history most appropriate? Almost all the specific references used in support of his hypotheses relate to Uganda, Kenya or Tanzania. How, in summary, do we begin to evaluate and perhaps build upon Brett's hypotheses?

For, despite all that is said above, I do believe that there is an original core to Brett's argument which does merit further attention. This is the proposition that the parasitic nature of independent Africa's state bureaucracy can in large part be explained by the class position of the bureaucrats. The hypothesis here is very clear (p 26). It is that the African bureaucrats who were suddenly promoted to such senior and rewarding positions around independence remained enmeshed, in terms of family and kinship connections, in the petty commodity producing sector, and retained control of assets there. 'Being placed in direct control of the resources to be provided by the state to direct producers, it was inevitable that these should be used to extend their own private economic power and that of their kinship network'. Once started on the slippery slope, the rest came naturally.

One can swop impressions about the plausibility of this hypothesis in various circumstances. For example, it appears appealing in the light of a comparison with the Third World country I know best, Sri Lanka. Here the long persistence after Independence of an efficient and totally indigenised state apparatus appears intimately related to the prior emergence of an indigenous capitalist bourgeoisie in the classic sense of that term [Moore 1985]. On the other hand, Brett's hypothesis would appear to require considerable supplementation in the case of Uganda, the country which his stylised history of Africa seems most nearly to fit. Surely one would have to give considerable analytic priority to the preference given by the British in military recruitment to the impoverished peoples of the dry North, and the grim fact that, until the recent takeover by the Southern-based National Resistance Army, Ugandan politics after Independence became increasingly simplified

around the plunder of the South by peoples of the North organised in the 'national' army? Uganda may however be an exceptional case, and Brett's focus on class analysis in the broad Marxian tradition more appropriate elsewhere. His hypotheses are testable to a greater degree than many propositions made in social science.

Conclusion

My delving into some of the details of the papers in this collection has been intended to support two major points of critique. One is that the collection has not fully explored the ambiguities and contradictions in prevalent 'commonsense' understandings of the contribution of political factors to Africa's current problems. The other is that social science in general, but especially political economy — in both its 'left' and its 'right' wing variants — may be less capable than some of its practitioners imply of explaining such major societal transformations as have been observed in parts of Africa in recent decades, i.e. simultaneous decay of state systems and economic decline.

The fact that I have singled out political economy implies a belief that other branches of social science might be a little more helpful. As suggested above, I do find in political science at least the basis of a more plausible interpretation of Africa's problems than I find in political economy. For political economy is inherently limited, focusing mainly on the conflict over distribution of resources where the context — the state, the political system, the institutional structure, according to your terminological preference — is given. And in much of Africa it is the very existence of this state context which is problematic.

I would not go so far as to claim that political science either has or can provide a satisfactory interpretation of the political dimensions of Africa's crisis. But the most plausible attempt to provide such an account that I have seen [Sandbrook 1986] does focus on the political problem of state failure, and relies much more on the concept of political culture than the framework of political economy. Sandbrook pays great attention to explaining inter-state variations. However, his general argument focuses on the crisis of legitimacy which arose in Africa once independence had been achieved. Weakly integrated peasant societies; the lack of a middle class with a strong interest in limiting bureaucratic power and ensuring some degree of rationality in bureaucratic performance; the absence of a single national political tradition; and authoritarian colonial models of politics — these variables explain the existence of a general problem of legitimacy and the reversion to personal rule. And the exigencies and uncertainties of personal rule explain the reluctance of capitalists to invest and the resort to statism as a way of 'feeding' the political system at the expense of the economy. Adverse trends in the international economy in the 1970s and early 1980s then induce a 'downward spiral of economic and political decline' [Sandbrook 1986:321].

But perhaps the most important question of all is how far a correct understanding of the causes of Africa's problems is relevant to finding a solution to those problems. Social science has perhaps more than its fair share of people like me who love to explain the history of any situation, and justify this with the claim that you need to know the causes of problems to find cures for them. The medical analogy is however misleading. When causes A . . . F give rise to societal problem or situation P, they also give rise to many other things, including a changed perception of the world among the actors involved. Repeat A . . . F and you may not get P again! Take them away and P may remain, but there may now be new ways of making P go away. Or, more simply, you cannot reverse the reel of history. As I hinted above, the evidence suggests that the experience of economic and political crisis has changed the perceptions of Africa's politicians about what is feasible and desirable. Perhaps it is in influencing these perceptions and exploring current options that political science could be of the greatest use.

APPENDIX: Contents of IDS Bulletin vol 17 no 1, January 1986

State Intervention at the Cabbage Roots: A Case Study from Kenya
Thomas Wolf

Village Responses to Food Marketing Alternatives in Northern Zambia: The Case of the Mambwe Economy
Johan Pottier

African States and Agriculture: Issues for Research
Martha Gephart

Developmental States and African Agriculture: An Editorial Postscript
Theo Mars

References

Barry, B. M., 1970, *Sociologists, Economists and Democracy,* Collier-Macmillan, London

Bates, R. H., 1981, *Markets and States in Tropical Africa. The Political Basis of Agricultural Politics,* University of California Press, Berkeley

—1983, *Essays on the Political Economy of Rural Africa,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Colander, D. C., 1984, 'Introduction' in D. C. Colander (ed).

—(ed), 1984, *Neoclassical Political Economy. An Analysis of Rent-Seeking and DUP Activities,* Ballinger Publishing Co., Cambridge (Mass.)

Heath, A., 1976, *Rational Choice and Social Exchange. A Critique of Exchange Theory,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Huntington, S. P., 1968, *Political Order in Changing Societies,* Yale University Press, New Haven and London

IBRD, 1981, *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Agenda for Action,* Washington DC

—1984, *Towards Sustained Development in Sub-Saharan Africa,* Washington DC

Moore, M., 1985, *The State and Peasant Politics in Sri Lanka,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Sandbrook, R., 1986, 'The State and Economic Stagnation in Tropical Africa', *World Development* vol 14 no 3

Sender, J. and Smith, S., 1984, 'What's Right with the Berg Report and What's Left of its Critics?', *Discussion Paper* 192, IDS, Sussex

Staniland, M., 1985, *What is Political Economy? A Study of Social Theory and Underdevelopment,* Yale University Press, New Haven and London