
State and Agriculture in Africa: A Case of Means and Ends

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I am concerned in this article with the issue of how best to explore the inner world of the state to help us understand its effects on the social world outside it. The internal world of the state is constituted by the coexistence of, first, a political leadership, second, a body of permanent servants of the state and, third, a body of citizens with political rights and status. The inner workings of the state consist of the interaction within and between these categories of people. The issue, then, is how most fruitfully to understand that interaction and its consequences for improving state performance.

The central issue in the emerging debate about Africa's agricultural crisis is not about methods of cultivation or the changes which need to be made to them [cf. Berry 1984]. It is not, in a real sense, about agriculture at all. The essence of the problem lies elsewhere, in an all-pervasive scepticism about the only social mechanism capable of responding to the situation in both the short and the longer run. There is a problem about the state in Africa: it doesn't work. What was once seen as the solution is now the problem [World Bank 1984].

This corrosive doubt about the capacity of the state to cope with the tasks ahead is based on three conclusions drawn from the experience of African states since independence. There is first of all the perception of an inability to attain goals that public organisations have set. Secondly, there is the gross abuse of state resources for personal advantage; the state is treated by official and citizen alike as 'an object of plunder' [Austin 1984:31]. Thirdly, state activity is often not merely ineffective, but often startlingly disruptive and destructive, making life more difficult by undermining existing arrangements without putting anything in their place [Apeldoorn 1981; Coulson 1982]. In combination, these three factors result in a vicious cycle of repeated failure followed by response which may be more coercive but not necessarily any more effective.

Few people would deny that there is a serious problem of 'implementation' [Pressman and Wildawsky 1973] in Africa, whether this is put in the form of saying that 'the resources that are available may not be deployed efficiently, nor are officials as able, well-trained or diligent as their jobs require' [Jackson and Rosberg 1982:31] or talking about 'the failure of the state to enforce the logic of its own strategies on the people (who) are supposed to execute them' [Beckman 1984:37]. Even before they were highlighted by the problems of famine relief, there were plenty of examples of disastrous situations on which to draw. Famine has merely shown up more dramatically the inability of states to cope with the problems of the historically remarkably successful food production systems of Africa.

There have been over the last 10 years a number of cases that illustrate the weakness and potentially disruptive and harmful effects of state activity: the return to natural vegetation of large tracts of agricultural land, such as the state sisal plantations in Tanzania; valuable farming land in Kenya which is not cultivated, but owned for speculative purposes by politicians; the destruction of coffee plants by farmers in East Africa; reports of armed guards preventing the movement of food across district boundaries in Kenya; extraordinary situations in which in places like Ghana, famous for its consumer markets, urban consumers spend the larger part of their day hunting for food; cases in which people trading in food are tried by People's Courts, as in Ghana, or put in detention camps as economic criminals, as in Tanzania; countries such as those in the Sahel in which government is so weak or weakened that foreign aid agencies form a kind of state-within-a-state in direct control of short and long term solutions; agricultural projects, like some of those in Nigeria, in which a self-conscious attempt is made, not to link up with the local agrarian bureaucracy, but to bypass it altogether; reports of quite massive movement of food by criminal gangs across national boundaries, such as that between Zambia and Tanzania; and quite bizarre

scenes such as those surrounding the marketing of cocoa in Ghana in which the authorities in charge happily indulge themselves with crates of whisky and entertainments by bands of actors and actresses while apparently unconcerned that they are, in Douglas Rimmer's apt word 'garotting' the source of their own wealth [Rimmer 1983:249].

These are cases that need to be confronted because they leave an unresolved question mark against anything which may now be done with African agriculture. An understanding of this failure of implementation comes before discussion of substantive policy. There seems little point in any reflection on appropriate policies: whatever they are, something quite different from what is intended will happen, much of it useless, some of it worse.

We need, in fact, to move away from an immediate concern with issues of policy towards issues of state organisation. It is no longer viable to work out policies and assume that the apparatus that carried out these policies can be designed for optimal functionality and brought into being by fiat. We need to move away, too, from the obsession with 'resources', with an all-consuming interest in the quantity of manpower, expertise or money devoted to specific ends, towards more understanding of how they are used. Before we choose good policies, we need to choose good forms of organisation. We need to know how to regenerate public organisation in Africa.

Politics versus Development?

The regeneration of public organisation in Africa is far more difficult than it might first appear. There is not only a practical problem but also one of understanding, of analysis and diagnosis. We need to develop a way to understand the interstices of the state. What, according to those who know most about it, will we find?

I shall focus on three accounts here — by Dennis Austin (1984), Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg (1982), and Christopher Clapham (1985). They will be recognised by students of African politics as the most important attempts in recent years to provide an overview of the African state, a statement of its most basic features, and are attempting to explain these. They might be said to convey the conventional wisdom of this field of study.

These analysts view the organisation and action of African states as a response to the imperatives of power in a context where that power is 'fragile', not yet 'institutionalised', because of a 'disjunction between the state and any shared social values' [Clapham 1985:40]. The state is almost a foreign body of society.

In the absence of any firm foundations to political power, every state act is devoted to the maintenance of control of ruler over state and of state over society by means of bribery, manipulation, the creation of dependence and coercion. We cannot be surprised to find that the developmental role of the state is peripheral. It is in fact naive to expect from African states 'a rational and concerted assault on problems of underdevelopment' or 'public organisational rationality' [Jackson and Rosberg 1982:23]. If this analysis were substantially correct, it would exclude the possibility of a regeneration of public organisation in Africa, at any rate in the foreseeable future.

The Need for a New Approach to the Analysis of Institutions

In this article I argue that, especially in Africa, we cannot explain the politics of the state solely by its social context [cf Dunn 1978]. The outcomes of political struggles are not a mere barometer of the impact of social forces. Political outcomes are shaped by the individual and corporate interests and views of state functionaries; the responsiveness of states to the needs and demands of its citizens is selective and states can set out to block and manipulate those interests. There are internal as well as external determinants of state conduct. If the aim is to understand how states can change the societies they govern, and not merely reflect their current condition, it is necessary to identify and analyse these determinants.

The political analysis here examined gives centrality to 'power' — understood as control, as the capacity to extract obedience. The analysis depends on the distinction between a situation in which obedience is unproblematically extended because an obligation to do so is accepted by those who obey, and one in which obedience has to be extracted by the threat of force or the inducement of personal advantage. The object of obedience in the first case is some collective entity like the state, nation, church, clan, village or tribe; in the second, it is some specific individual. The argument is that allegiance of the first kind does indeed exist in Africa but not vis-a-vis the state. The state is a complete moral vacuum [Ekeh 1975]. 'Power' when examined turns out to be a description of the lack of the existence of an institutional framework for political relationships.

The advantage of this analysis lies in its ability to draw together most of the identified ills of African political life, experienced to a greater or lesser extent in particular states: the dominant role of a coercive and manipulative relationship between politicians and state functionaries, on the one hand, and citizens on the other, a personal relationship which takes priority over any right or obligation involved in the

relationship; the prevalence of the same sort of relationship within and between political leaderships and the corps of officials; the lack of effectiveness of any sanction for the neglect of obligations; the consequent irrelevance of the performance or lack of performance of any duty or task, or of the actual outcomes of any activity; the reluctance of producers to engage in any market transaction, whether with the state or privately, because of the lack of ability to ensure the performance of future obligations entered into in an economic relationship; the reliance on institutional frameworks of kin and clan to define rights and duties in relationships, whether to escape state power where it still exists [Hyden's 'economy of affection'] or as a response to the 'deflation of state power' [Chazan 1983] where it does not. These problems are all shown to be essentially a breakdown in the institutional fabric which enables individuals to enter into future obligations and rely on others to perform theirs. It is a problem which affects market relationships just as much as transactions with the state: the former cannot in these circumstances be regarded as an alternative to the latter.

This is, I think, quite helpful. The problems start with the attempt to suggest causal relationships between these elements. It is establishing some convincing causal texture which explains the success and failure of institutional ordering that is the key to understanding the present situation in Africa. The nature of that causal texture depends on which particular account of the nature and origins of institutions is adopted. There are radically different views on this issue.

There is a practical as well as a theoretical imperative behind this demand for a convincing causal analysis of institutions. Strategies for what is to be done now with the state depend, implicitly or explicitly, on at least some sense of what is and is not flexible in the situation. Those who recommend new policies make the implicit assumption that it is possible to implement them. Behind each policy stand assumptions about the determinants of institutional structure and development.

The conventional view of the African state as outlined above, depends on a particular idea of what institutions are, viz. as the point at which the values of a culture are translated into feelings of moral obligation to conform to rules of social interaction. This analysis reflects a deeply entrenched tradition in the study of Africa which defines its most fundamental characteristic as the conflict of cultures. The culture supposedly embodied in state and market is something new and alien, thus there is nothing surprising in the ineffectiveness of state institutions — they are simply never translated into a moral experience. Hence the continual emphasis on the significance of the fact that

African states are 'new' (the themes are ably summarised by Tordoff 1984). Cultural differences have great significance to these writers because they are seen as determinants of institutional development. Since deep cultural change is not easily achieved, the causal texture of the situation is a very constrained one.

The work of Robert Bates [and others: Rothschild and Curry 1978] is of central significance precisely since it implies a different analysis of social institutions, rather than building a case for 'free market' policies. The significance lies, first, in largely ignoring the whole apparatus of the 'tradition vs modernity' school of thought and hence the theorists of the European transition of modernity. Second, it is an analysis in which culture does not play the central role. Thirdly, it shows, quite unlike conventional neoclassical economic analysis, an awareness of the possible utility of institutional frameworks other than that of the competitive market. The point of this kind of analysis is to show how institutions arise out of the self-interested interaction of a multitude of individual economic agents. This is quite compatible with the notion that 'just as Adam Smith's invisible hand . . . leads economic agents to reach Pareto-optimal competitive equilibrium, it can also lead them to create social institutions that will facilitate their interaction when competitive outcomes are not optimal' [Schotter 1982:4].

This view of institutions is a distinctively 20th century one with its origins in the work of Karl Menger. My aim in this article is to explore the potential of another distinctively 20th century tradition of institutional analysis, perhaps the one most dominant in political theory. It, too, involves the initial step of rejecting the culturalist framework and accepting that, at any rate in this century, institutions have to be built not by using moral restraint to suppress self-interest but by basing them on it. The key concept of that tradition is that of 'organisation', understood as the activity of assembling the means for the pursuit of collective purposes by the carefully arranged juxtaposition of individual purposes [Wolin 1960:Ch 9].

In the rest of this article, I shall explain the relevance of an organisational perspective to our understanding of African states. This approach needs justification because it emerged out of the very different task of thinking about what was fundamentally new about the politics of the first world in this century. Yet there is a case to be made, I think, for seeing organisational theories as central to the analysis of African states.

The Organisational Texture of Modern States

The organisational conception of modern politics begins by asserting that it is the dominant characteristic

of 20th century states that the people from which they are composed (whether they are rulers, public servants or citizens) are combined into a multitude of organisations and relate to each other as organisations. Thus power becomes a derivative of the capacity to organise politically. The state responds to the demands of its citizens not as individuals or groups, but as organised interests. One social group will be better treated than another because it is easier to organise. Fundamental social conflicts (like those of class or region) will be organised out of existence; the only threat to the state comes from those revolutionaries who have managed to develop themselves into an 'organisational weapon'. Institutions come to depend upon the power of organisation, not vice versa. Numbers cease to count in physical conflict; a small well-organised army will smash a far larger number of opponents. Ideologies have to transform themselves into programmes for the state-induced reform of private organisations [Wolin 1960:Ch 9].

There are, however, two sides to the phenomenon of the organisational state. On the one hand, there is its role as an essential tool for human emancipation [Lindblom 1977], capable of achievements quite beyond the capacity of the 'self-organisation of the poor' [Gran 1983] on a local level, or the 'magic of the market' on a national one. But it is also an experience which is full of dangers and of the costs of failure. It is entirely wrong to assume that, like some startling new technological device which needs only to be installed to work wonders for ever, organisation eradicates problems. It has not been like that for us, nor for the peoples of Africa.

There is also between us, sooner or later, a common experience of the failure of organisations: of the accumulation of unintended consequences and counterproductive side-effects, of massive rigidity and failure to come to terms with new needs and circumstances, the sinister presence of entrenched interests that block all room for manoeuvre [Allison 1971; Burns and Stalker 1961; Crozier and Friedberg 1980]. The core of that problem seems to be one of maintaining performance over time: the same structure that once seemed successful may, over time, become pathological. With organisations we get the benefits now, but unless we are careful, we have to pay a heavy cost later.

Why Organisations Get Sick, But Don't Necessarily Die

That organisations grow old, rigid, oppressive and useless is understandably not something that those who propose to transform the Third World with their assistance have gone out of their way to stress. But if we recognise that the sorts of pathology encountered

in Africa are inherent in a shared experience of the domination of the organisational imperative, the agenda of issues which emerges has much in common with that in our own societies. That agenda locates the potential for pathology in the fact of organisation itself, not in the delusions, venality and incompetence of individuals. It is a critique which is ruthless about the potential consequences of wrong organisational choices, far greater than those that a sensitive and informed sceptic like the late Bernard Schaffer envisaged.

It is worth briefly capturing at least some of the main themes of the critique. The basic argument asserts that both the benefits and drawbacks of the organised pursuit of collective purpose arise from the fact that formal organisations are artifacts, artificial beings. Though they are constructed from individuals, they are combined and transformed into something quite different from their raw material. Formal organisation displaces some of the fundamental characteristics which enable individuals to choose and act in the world. Organisational rationality displaces individual rationality, organisational values displace social values, organisational knowledge displaces the ways in which individuals learn and use information to cope with uncertainty.

What is important about these artificial beings is their potential not merely for particular 'failures', but for sustained reinforcing failure, in which the corrective actions adopted use the very means that produced the failure itself. I am thinking here for example, of situations in which problems like over-centralisation are corrected by centrally controlled programmes of compulsory decentralisation, or that process of infinite regress in which lack of coordination produces institutions for coordination which in their turn need coordinating with the institutions which need coordinating, etc. There are also the more familiar examples in which organisational action is consistently guided by wrong or inadequate information because the organisational production and distribution of knowledge reproduces erroneous assumptions, self-fulfilling prophecies, and ignorance of vital factors [Hirshleifer and Riley, 1979]. When artificially created giants make mistakes they are correspondingly giant.

The other fundamental element of the critique of organisation refers to the relation between this artificial creature and its human and social components. People continue to be individuals, with their own aspirations and interests; social and cultural institutions, technological imperatives and economic realities continue to shape them. It would be tempting to assume that an organisation must respond to the needs of the individuals of which it is composed, that it must practise the values of its society or that it is

constrained by the need to compete on the market. But things are not quite as simple as that. As a species, this artificial man may, as the predominant metaphor in the field puts it, survive by adaptation to his environment, but he is fiendishly clever about shaping the environment to which he has to adapt.

There are points at which organisations change back into recognisably human shape, when promotions are discussed or goods sold to customers on the market. This is something that our artificial man is capable of coping with. All the rules of organisational design and management science can be boiled down to the single doctrine that the shape of the organisation should give absolute priority to these points of danger and the minimisation of their consequences. How that is done is quite simple: by the creation of monopolies, large and small. Organisations are structured to survive by creating situations in which they depend on no-one in particular and someone does depend on them, in particular. The creation of monopolies is what organisation is all about: the very principle of specialisation and differentiation of skills, the division of labour, creates a set of functionaries highly dependent on one another and distributes power to those in a good position to make the necessary strategic moves to exploit those dependencies [Crozier and Friedberg 1980; Hickson et al. 1971].

The point about all these features is that they are deeply ambiguous, the potential for good and for bad are inseparable. Organisations can be too successful at maintaining themselves; but they can also fail to do so, the process called 'organisational decline' [Greenhalgh 1982] slowly disintegrating in costly death agonies, such as those of the 'deflation of state power' in Ghana, so strikingly analysed by Naomi Chazan [1983].

Focusing on the State

Two points about the state may be helpful in getting to grips with seemingly intractable problems of state organisation in some African countries. The state as a whole is a chain of linked relationships; the most critical points lie at the joins between the principal parts: between political leaders and administrators, between administrators and technical experts such as agronomists, doctors or engineers; and between all of these groups and citizens. If things go wrong at one point, it can affect every relationship along the chain. The existing literature on African states supports the contention that the main problems lie precisely at these points: the persistent problems in the politics-administration relation (the problem of 'political interference' with the workings of administration; the problematic relationship between party and administration in places like Nkrumah's Ghana and

Nyerere's Tanzania); the fuzzy and sometimes chaotic relationship between central administration and service departments and the parastatals, the grossly unsatisfactory relationships between the latter and the public [Tordoff 1984:Ch 6].

Our analysis must focus on the interconnections and not on the parts themselves, seen in isolation. The disorders of each part are quite possibly the disorders of wrong connection with the others: like the degeneration of either party or administration, or both, by the interminable struggles between them; or the sacking and looting of public organisations by politicians bent on using them as election fund-raising committees, or the relation between the finances of parastatals and those of the state as a whole. These problematic relationships are not resolved by isolating each element and getting that right.

It can be misleading to look at this or that bit of the state, to study parties, or local government, or parastatals, or settlement schemes. Wherever one lands up in the interstices of the state, any particular bit of it seems more often than not to be organised in a generally understandable way: one can see the sense of it being that way. Those intelligible bits don't necessarily make sense when put together. If one took something like agricultural extension work for example, the problems involved in their organisation can be clarified and a path to their improvement delineated [Leonard 1977; Moris 1981]. It is when one tries to understand extension services in the wider context of public services or the interests mediated through party, that one has to ask whether what seem 'obstacles' to good extension are not seen by others involved as essential requirement [Leo 1984].

A second point that may provide some sense of orientation is the notion that the critical relationships that make up the state are essentially organisational ones. It is not helpful to see them as either matters of personal relationships or as 'institutional' relationships defined by rights and duties, justified by some general principle accepted as binding by all parties. We have to learn to manage without those.

There is not much of value to be gained, for example, by seeing the relationship between political leaders and administrators as one of subordination, defined by the farmers' formal right to command. Bureaucrats have great power and their relationship to rulers is much more like that of an exchange of equals within a division of labour, notwithstanding constitutional mythologies. Politicians are leaders, providing a sense of public purpose, infusing a society with commitment and direction; administrators have other preoccupations (not only those of personal interest); but if the relationship goes sour the politicians will be got rid of.

Organisational relationships are tools, instruments to bring into line individual and collective purposes, making them grow dynamically with one another and preventing their separation. In that respect they are just like market relations. Organisation is one way of coping with the overwhelming presence of private and partial interest: the visible hand of organisation is the alternative to the invisible hand of the market. It exploits the potentialities of putting those private interests into different combinations and making them serve a purpose beyond themselves.

Africa: Their Problems and Ours

I have argued in this article the value of identifying the central problems of African states as those inherent in all 20th century states. This is not to deny differences that are real enough — these are merely put to one side while an attempt is made to work out what sorts of problems there are. But I think it worth working on the hypothesis — and it is no more — that in their essence those problems are a version of the problems of first world states: of an archaic state organisation in need of fundamental repair. Africa is not the only place with a shrinking, dying political arena, systems of personal rule, large, blundering, pointless bureaucracies, increasing authoritarianism in the face of state failure, inability to cope with the world market and a loss of coherent public purpose. The resolution of the problems of Africa must start with the recognition that they are another form of our own. If we do not accept that, we may be looking now at Africa, not as our past, but as our future.

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