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## Book Reviews

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Colin Leys, **Underdevelopment in Kenya. The Political Economy of Neo-Colonialism.** Heinemann, London, 1975, pp. 284, £4.00.

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The main historical sequence in this book, as seen by the author, can be described fairly simply.

First, the colonialists arrived in Kenya, and almost at once began two processes which the author describes as the root of underdevelopment—the investment of capital and the employment of wage-labour. They protected their interests by building up various forms of monopoly round their enterprises, and by using administrative force to obtain a labour supply from the African economy. This process continued during the colonial period, gradually building up a dual economy of foreign, capitalist investment and Westernised consumption patterns in one part, contrasted with the poverty of the rural African economy, within which wage-labour, at very low levels, continued to increase. In this process the author lays much heavier emphasis on the importance of major plantations and trading companies than on the 3,000-4,000 settler farmers.

Next, there is the period of preparation for independence. Africans are slowly but increasingly trained to join the capitalist sector, and to identify with a philosophy of a property-owning democracy, into which Africans would be increasingly drawn, by the classical process of division of labour, into commercialized farming, trade, services and industrial employment. Leading Africans joined the ruling group in the civil service or parastatal 'monopoly' organizations, and, a little later, grasped the opportunity to become large 'capitalist' farmers. The stage was set for formal withdrawal of the colonial power, since its commercial agents could work in harmony with the new African ruling group, and foreign capital could continue to enter and operate profitably in Kenya. For the African successors, in the words of the ILO Mission, "the immediate problem appeared to be to take over the economy, not to change it."

In the early days of independence, the Kikuyu leadership managed to outmanoeuvre KADU, the rival alliance, capturing the Kalenjin peoples as an ally, the Coast peoples, and (less decisively) the Kamba, and gradually isolating the Luo, despite the fact that the Luo were original KANU supporters.

There were, however, discontented groups to be appeased—the 'forest fighters' squatters and landless, some of the growing petty bourgeoisie. Kenyatta had two aces in his hand—European land to allocate to the 'peasant' groups, Asian business to whittle away in favour of the petty bourgeois group. A third—jobs in government—also became increasingly useful.

As part of the transfer of power, Kenya had been endowed with a panoply of Western democratic institutions, chief of which was Parliament. The leadership alliance managed to use this in subtle ways as a safety-valve for the expression of dissatisfaction, while at the same time easily outmanoeuvring opposition at election times; for the opposition fell into the trap of using parliamentary methods, and were defeated by last minute alterations of the rules, by which their candidates were hampered or disqualified, or occasionally imprisoned.

Increasingly, the real power became concentrated in 'Kenyatta's Court' (at Gatundu, the Coast, Nakuru, etc.) where the leader, with a small inner circle (Koinage, Njonjo, Mungai) and a rather larger outer circle of ministers, received deputations (bearing gifts and petitions), harangued them on loyalty, and made the necessary concessions of patronage. Parliament remained, and occasionally protested; but the Cabinet as such met increasingly rarely. The civil service was bound to the leadership by jobs and the right to own land and businesses; the army, after a shaky moment in 1970-71 when the C-in-C was on the point of backing the opposition, was equally loyal, and was supplemented by a Kikuyu-led General Service Unit for special security.

At this point the story ends, at the present day, with a huge question mark about the succession problem ("to which any 'bonapartist' government is necessarily prone") and about the possibility of retaining the stability of a very unequal society still faced by problems of employment and of poverty.

Colin Leys has supported this story with his usual industry, factual material and references, and, in such bare outline, few people would quarrel with it, although no doubt there will be challenges on some details (e.g. the extent of cash wage employment on small-holdings) from critics who are more expert than I. The bare outline above,

designed only to give the main sequence and thrust of the book, does no justice to the social analysis which the author has devoted to the labour situation, to the peasant economy, to the growth of a petty bourgeois class, to political events (particularly the KPU and the Mutiso plot) and to the balance between European, Asian and African ownership and use of capital. The concluding chapter gives an excellent overview of the story as he has told it, giving added coherence and clarity. We should expect nothing less from this author; but fulfilled expectations demand a fresh tribute.

But the story is not told in the language I have used: it is told in the full-blown phraseology of Marxism: and at the centre of that is the word 'exploitation' which is invariably used of the whole wage labour system. There are semantic points here, which might be noticed in passing. On one side, there is the French *mettre en valeur*, in the sense of the transformation of potential (minerals 4,000 ft. underground: fertility in the soil) into valuable assets. And there is the moral, pejorative sense—'exploiting' labour as a form of robbery—which permeates both Marx and this book. Presumably 'development' must include *mise en valeur*, or both minerals and muscle-power will remain valueless. 'Underdevelopment' then, refers to the political/economic power structure (capitalism) through which the *mise en valeur* takes place—the way in which capital (another semantic problem) is used, since capital, as savings from consumption, is as necessary to Chairman Mao as it is to President Ford. It would be helpful, for many reasons, if the morals and the economics were distinguished by separate words.

Apart from 'exploitation' we have the usual range of terminology—class struggles, proletariats, compradors, neo-colonialism, apart from the new and rather tiresome 'underdevelopment' which appears to mean a mixture of unjust development, development for some people at the expense of others, and creation of a dual economy. The last is the more usual phrase, and as such it has been extensively studied and commented upon before now; the author dislikes the dual concept, since 'underdevelopment' implies, not two sectors, but one economy in which the rich exploit and depend upon the poor. This is also a semantic point—the facts are the same.

Here it might be useful to quote some sentences about the 'underdevelopment' of the Kikuyu, which, nevertheless, brought them to dominate Kenya:

"The Kikuyu . . . were undergoing a profound social transformation from the earliest years

of colonial rule, based on an abrupt divorce from their established mode of production and semi-proletarianization within the capitalist mode, accompanied and accelerated by other factors, not least mission education. It was these 'positive' features of Kikuyu underdevelopment that provided the basis for Kikuyu nationalism in the 1920s and '30s and for the spectacular progress of Kikuyu agriculture under the Swynnerton Plan in the late 1950s. Underdevelopment had taken a form which did not wholly destroy the Kikuyu social and economic structure; it transformed it and compressed it, like a wound up coil spring, which expanded again with tremendous energy when the pressure was finally released at independence."

To some people this description would sound like development under increasing land pressure, accelerated by the high educational standards of the Alliance High and other schools, and utilizing the opportunities of highly profitable coffee and cattle-raising, and of the proximity of Nairobi both as a commercial market, a source of jobs, and the seat of a Kikuyu-dominated government. To Colin Leys it is 'underdevelopment' though containing 'positive factors'. I am not sure that his descriptive terms are very illuminating.

Here I must confess that I now find Marxist theory and terminology wearisome and inadequate. It is wearisome in the sense that most hagiography shares. Even in this book Colin Leys steps aside to explain apparent contradictions between Paul Baran and Marx, ending with the truly remarkable statement that, if Marx had lived another 25 years, he would no doubt have come to agree with the Neo Marxists and 'underdevelopment' theory. We have another excursion into Marx's account of Louis Bonaparte (1850), constant references to Russia, "rich peasants" supplemented by the hagiographical "Kulaks", the views of Shanin, Stolypin and Francois Fanon. Perhaps I had a surfeit of this on reading the endless diatribes of Marx, Engels and Lenin against their misguided opponents. I find it inadequate because the high abstraction needed to reach a narrow range of all-explaining concepts masks the immense variety and differences of history. Is Kenya really like Russia, or the Europe of Marx's time? Is there not more significant material in the history of Africa since 1900? Are there not other contemporary writers on the politics and economics of this 20th century continent who might also have been quoted? Is there not exciting work to be done in comparing the effects of the extraordinary impact of

the Western world on Livingstone's Africa, without returning always to the well-worn paradigm, and even the exact phraseology, of 19th century Europe?

Far more important than personal views is the fact that the effort to cram Kenya into the Marxist mould leads to some of the weakest sections of the book. Where the author is mainly describing the sequence of events, the distribution of power, the distribution of capital, the labour force, the nature of tribalism, he is decisive and usually convincing. But when the peculiar situation of many Africans, with one foot in the land and customary tenure and the other in a wage paid job, has to be squeezed into the narrow choices of description which Marxist theory offers, the paragraphs become tortured and even contradictory. Thus 'peasant' modes of production are said (p.172) to be transitional, giving way more and more to capitalist modes and relationships. Yet, after more illustration of this, the very next paragraph (p.173) starts off by stating: "There was another sense in which the 'peasant' modes of production would be likely to endure indefinitely, so long as the capitalist mode of production remained dominant". There is a long, also tortured argument (pp. 22-25) on revolution, and another (pp. 207-212), full of Marx, Bonaparte and Fanon, and full of the 'contradictions beloved of Marxist theory, which remind me of a splendidly flat line by Walt Whitman: "Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself". (Leaves of Grass.)

The *odium theologicum* which to some extent powers the book also leads the author into occasional carelessness. "Europeans had a monopoly of high potential land in the highlands." (p. 34) Leys then immediately notes that 80 per cent of high potential land lay in the African reserves; but, he says, the Africans were prevented from farming it profitably. There are a few more such points (local steel making in the Chinese Great Leap was *not* a success), a few barbed jokes, not perhaps worthy of the author (e.g. p.8 "Sometimes the initial relationship [capitalist-Third World] was largely one of simple plunder and extortion, though generally represented as trade (as in the case of the slave 'trade')"). There are other statements scattered through the book of a viewpoint which, quite frankly and avowedly, can see nothing but wickedness, without redeeming feature, in the whole process which the book describes. It is a story of power and exploitation from start to finish.

It is on this issue that I would make a final comment. The whole of human history is indeed,

seen through one lens, a dreadful record of greed, hypocrisy, war, tyranny, treachery, assassination, conquest and enslavement: Kenyan history can therefore be no exception, if this is the lens you use. But there are other lenses, which reveal motives of revolt against the story, motives of reform, occasionally, in brief eras, in special cases, a rather happier scene. To describe Kenya—or any other place—solely in terms of oppression is to deny the mixture of individuals, the honest as well as the crooks, the well-intentioned as well as the fixers, the devoted as well as the selfish. It also involves a measure of arrogance, in being able, with hindsight, to see how wicked and mistaken were some earlier generations who, poor fools, thought they were doing good.

Moreover, it is not as though those who tried to make Kenya into a parliamentary, property-owning democracy had any other, far more desirable model to apply, least of all a model applicable to the extraordinary circumstances of Tropical Africa in the mid-twentieth century. The author's strong criticism of the ILO Mission is that it recommended reforms (reforms which Leys would wish) without perceiving that, without a revolution, these reforms were wholly impracticable for lack of the political will to make them. What else could they have done—follow the Irishman's direction "If you want to get there you should not start from here"? Or point the way, with the chance that the very existence of a signpost, would, in the process of change (including the succession crisis) give at least some extra rationale and vigour to those who might be prepared to fight their way along it.

Colin Leys has written a strong, sometimes brilliant application of one limited syllogism to Kenyan history, and in doing so has helped to put into a framework some of the loose talk about 'dual economies', 'informal sectors', 'African socialism', 'mass participation', etc. But it is in my view too narrow a framework, too harshly selective of the facts about human behaviour and motivation, so that much of the variety and complexity of truth has been squeezed out. Pre-colonial Africa had to go through some form of pressure if it was to move from the limitations—war, disease, hunger—within which it had lived. If there were other possible paths, why should we assume that they would have been less wicked or painful? It may be that the experience of Kenya will be the prelude to the revolution of socialism, equality and peace which Marxists recommend; but whatever the outcome, the experience is not to be ranked among the worst episodes of human foolishness and vice. Meanwhile, we are in the middle of the story,

having evolved a 'comprador' class, 'a bourgeois and petty bourgeois group', 'proletarians and gradually proletarianized peasants', and a considerable national income. Let us hope that Colin Leys will one day paint a picture of the next period with a wider paradigm of theory and comparative vision, both of Africa and of the dilemmas of human society in the processes of growth and change.

