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## CRISES IN AFRICA: ETATISATION, THE PEASANTRY, AND THE LOGIC OF DIMINISHING REPRODUCTION

The dimensions of the current crises in the Third World and the African continent, in particular, are not in doubt. Yet, if the most glaring and most immediate aspect of the current phase of the crises has manifested itself in the continent's agricultural sectors, it is clear that the current phase of the crises is not confined to those sectors. Indeed the current crises of food availability and/or agricultural production are only the most recent, if the most severe, manifestations of a long series of ever more intense crises characterised by social upheaval and political instability as well as by severe economic problems which have occurred during the decades since independence.

### THE CRISES AND THE STATE

For reasons which will be present on the pages which follow we regard an understanding of the evolution and present character of the post-colonial state in Africa as an essential element in any analysis of the current phase of the crises of social reproduction in Africa.<sup>1</sup>

Since in our view the specific nature of the state in Africa is central to an understanding of the current phase of the crises and because, as Beckman's contribution clearly shows, the state in Africa is clearly a different kind of phenomenon replete with its own „specific contradictions”, it is our intention to briefly examine its origins and evolution (Beckman 1982).

There can be little doubt that the nature of the colonial state in Africa had a formative influence on its post-colonial successor (Tiagunienko 1976). In particular it is important to recognize three important aspects of this influence. First, the state in colonial Africa played a massive role in the colonial economy from its inception. Second,

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<sup>1</sup> For an interesting and provocative statement of the evolution of the state in the Nigerian context, see. G.P. Williams, „Class Relations in the Nigerian Political Economy”, in: G.P. Williams (ed.), *Nigeria, Economy and Society*, London 1976.

except in the case of the settler colonies, the most important elements of the ruling classes—those from the imperial homelands — never gained decisive and/or direct control over the means of production in one and quite possibly the most important sector of the colonial economy—agriculture. Third, in the wake of the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Second World War, as the contradictions of the colonial economy and policy became more acute, state intervention was massively expanded to include marketing, „development” and other sectors. It was during this period that imperial governments first attempted—through the use of currency controls, import quotas, etc. to manage the colonial economy (Cowan, Shenton).

In the immediate post-independence period Africa's ruling elites were spawned from diverse sectors and strata. Aristocracies where they had survived colonial rule, merchants who had prospered in the colonial economy, members of the colonial bureaucracies, armies and educational establishments; all had their representatives in the ruling elites of the post-colonial state.

The basis for initial and continued membership in the new ruling elites by representatives of these diverse groups hinged on their ability to transform potential power into actual power. Political resources, such as limited control over the means of production or exchange in a particular sector of the economy, control over the means of coercion, potentially key positions in the state apparatus or positions as representatives of regional or ethnic structures had to be realised as effective tools with which to carry out political struggles against other elite members or society at large.

During this period the ruling elite as a whole shared certain behavioural characteristics. In general, ruling elite members cultivated strong personal links or „traditional” ties, tended toward secret decision-making and the centralisation of political power. Ruling elite members attempted to legitimate their political positions by using such personal and „traditional” ties to gain a monopoly over ethnic and/or regional resources (Dutkiewicz 1980).

The principal economic resources at hand for use in intra-ruling elite political struggles were initially those inherited from the colonial state. Marketing boards, financial institutions, development plans, government contracts, import licenses, etc.: all formed a part of the battlefield of intra-ruling elite political struggle.

Success in business depended not only on the capacity to organise the production or exchange of commodities, nor on the entrepreneurial skills of businessmen but on access to and control over government decisions. Corruption which tended to become the main source of bu-

business success for politicians and their associates tended to be „contractual” in nature involving the more or less clearly defined exchange of illegally appropriated public goods, money and information. Not only politicians but many others as well felt threatened by changes in governments which deprived them of access to decision makers.

As control over the distribution of state resources eclipsed all other forms of economic gain, „politics” became not simply an instrument of class interests but the crucial means of ruling class formation through which politicians and their clients acquired the economic resources to establish themselves as a social class. In such a situation the expansion of the „state sector” in the economy followed logically as the primary means to expand ruling elite resources necessary for the maintenance of political power. State-owned enterprises, for example, served as a primary means of financing political parties, while the effectiveness of political control was enhanced by the elaboration of the system of terminology of managerial functions in state-controlled enterprises.

The quantitative expansion of the state sector, in and of itself, began to lead in the second decade of independence to a qualitatively different set of conditions within which the social reproduction of Africa’s ruling elites was to take place. Although there can be no sharp and clear divide between the period of the „ruling elite state” and a latter phase in the state was to be characterised by what we shall refer to as a „ruling group” we will argue that this latter phase was indeed significantly different. It is our task now to delineate some of these differences (Sledzevsky 1976).

Obviously the origins of the ruling group in African states lay in the ruling elites of the immediate post-independence period. However, the political positions and potential political resources which were most effectively utilised by the ruling group differed in emphasis from those which their predecessors exploited. Thus, during this phase, key positions in the state apparatus such as party leaderships, professional or „expert” statuses, permanent secretaryships, and especially those positions which gave direct access to control over state-owned means of production and exchange, such as state financial institutions, and state factories designed for import substitution, became more important than key positions in ethnic or regional structures.

The behavioural characteristics of the ruling group differed from those of the preceding ruling elite. Thus, for example, while ruling group members still attempted to maintain ethnic or regional ties, the monopolisation of ethnic or regional resources was no longer sufficient for their social reproduction as a ruling group. Increasingly, control

over state resources in general became the goal of ruling group members.

The expansion of the state sector subordinated other sectors of the economy including those rooted in particular ethnic or regional bases to its own logic of development. At the same time, it provided an expanding base for the reproduction of the ruling group, a base which permitted it to lead an increasingly autonomous existence. In the process of expanding its base the ruling group gradually became increasingly aware of its own collective interests regardless of ethnic or regional origin. The availability of state funds, manipulations of price structures, control over development programmes, etc. increasingly came to mean an ever narrower ruling group control over state property, a kind of corporate ownership. In this sense state property and increasingly the state itself became „reprivatised” by the ruling group.

Seen in this light the nature of corruption changed from the „contractual” corruption referred to earlier as „revindicalional” corruption. Corruption in this latter sense implied the claim of collective ownership, the tendency to treat state property as subject to the rules of private ownership.

Like corruption, inefficiency in establishing and managing state enterprises, financial institutions and development projects rather than preventing the social reproduction of this ruling group was an absolute prerequisite for it. The ruling groups’ social reproduction required an ever expanding number of parastatals to be created and development projects to be begun. In a very real sense, however, the completion, or, in a rational capitalist sense, the efficient operation of such parastatals or development projects was antithetical to the social reproduction of the ruling group. This was true simply because the rational or efficient operation of such firms and projects would have obviated the need to generate further projects and plans to achieve the ends which their predecessors failed to do. In this sense inefficiency was „efficient”, efficient for the expanded reproduction of the ruling group. One result of this was the growth of a poorly skilled and corrupt lower level bureaucracy incapable of fulfilling even its few professional obligations.

Inefficiency was also efficient for the ruling group in another important sense. By generating a never-ending series of parastatals and development projects the ruling group provided employment and no matter how small, inadvertant or fleeting, an amelioration of the conditions of life and a share of state resources for at least some members of the underclasses. In doing so the conditions of the social reproduction of

the ruling group increasingly penetrated and reshaped the conditions for the reproduction of society as a whole.

By the end of the second decade of independence the political economy of the post-colonial state came to be characterised by an economy of diminished reproduction and a politics of controlled shortage. The latter became the principal tool of political control, while the former was the material reality upon which such control was based. The diminished reproduction rather than the expanded reproduction of capital became the dominant logic of the ruling group and the post-colonial state.

If, as we have argued, the ruling group has played a key role in generating the structure of the post-colonial state in Africa and further that it has succeeded in establishing the bases of its own social reproduction in that state, a number of conclusions follow. First, the ruling group by establishing the bases of its own social reproduction is well on its way to becoming a class in its own right. Second, the oft-remarked „relative autonomy” of the state in post-colonial Africa is a direct reflection of the autonomous basis of social reproduction of this ruling group. Third, although the ruling group has depended for the creation and expansion of this basis for its own social reproduction on a combination of foreign capital and surpluses extracted from its own domestic underclasses, its interests, consciousness, and logic of reproduction are synonymous with neither. Indeed, they are in diametric opposition to both. It is to this opposition, which is central to an understanding of the current phase of the crises of the post-colonial political economy of Africa, which we now turn.

#### THE CRISES AND THE PEASANTRY

We are well aware of the contentiousness of the terms „household” and „family.” Indeed, it has recently been argued that in utilising this vocabulary anthropologists have merely traded the ambiguities of such terms as „kinship” and „lineage” for an equally nebulous terminology. The primary reason for this sense of despair regarding the concepts of family and household in the context of peasant societies seems to lie in the multiplicity and the fluidity of the empirically found arrangements which correspond to these terms.

The single most important element common to the social structure and political economy of family/household units which were responsible for the efflorescence of export crop production during the century 1860—1960 seems to have been the ability of those units to utilise both labour and goods for the reproduction of labour (especially food) obtai-

ned either directly as use-value or as commodities sold below their market prices in special circuits of exchange. The ability to obtain these goods in such a fashion meant that the price obtainable for agricultural exports on the world market did not have to pay the full cost of the reproduction of that labour which produced them. Although not so immediately apparent, the relationship between food, shelter, and labour produced and consumed as use-values and crops for export is similar to the more well-known phenomenon of the manner in which migrant labour for the mines in southern Africa was and is reproduced in part in villages and reserves and not directly by virtue of the mine-workers' wages alone. The ability of the household head to draw on non-commoditised food and labour as inputs in the production of agricultural exports was made possible via the dominant, patriarchal ideology of the household which governed the control of household resources. Indeed, the emergence of export crop production served to reinforce male head-of-household's control over household resources in the following manner.

During the initial period of export crop production, substitutes for socially necessary items such as tools, clothing, etc. became available in the form of imported European manufactures which could only be obtained for cash obtained through the sale of export crops. Since the control of money obtained via export crop production tended to be a male domain, the purchase of such commodities in replacement for their domestic production tended to reinforce the male head-of-household's control over the production and consumption patterns of the household. As this substitution of imported commodities for locally produced goods continued quickly, production patterns of not only households but regions and villages as a whole tended to be altered with a greater amount of time being devoted to export crop production, while a number of local production skills and techniques tended to disappear. In addition to this process of substitution, taxes imposed by colonial governments also had to be paid in cash obtained either directly or indirectly from the proceeds of export crop production. Finally, previously existing reciprocal labour obligations between both households and individuals also came to be increasingly commoditised.

The importance of the irreversibility of the process described above is as follows. When the price of agricultural exports increased, producer output tended to increase as might be expected. When, however, prices fell, output tended to continue to increase as producers attempted to maintain a stable cash income. Such a response tended to accelerate the commitment to agricultural production for the export market. In

addition, it made the rural household vulnerable to periodic capitalist crises.

Table 1

Year	Palm oil		Palm kernels		Cocoa		Groundnuts	
	exports in tons	price in dollars	exports	price	exports	price	exports	price
1900-04	53729		120778		305		475	
1905-09	65117		130241		1167		1531	
1910-14	77771	23.10	174236	15.65	3857		8195	5.17
1915-19	80485	24.54	184567	14.38	13887		41300	8.30
1920-24	90352	26.22	203021	15.26	27276		44278	13.36
1925-29	124716	24.16	255469	14.48	45483	39.30	109068	12.02
1930-34	122302	8.78	274584	6.82	62978	17.48	188744	5.80
1935-39	139000	9.52	334000	8.60	96000	18.58	249600	5.98
1940-44	134377	7.52	320613	5.58	102379	15.68	181901	7.66

Source: G. K. Helleiner, *Peasant Agriculture, Government and Economic Growth in Nigeria*, Homewood Ill, 1966. 4

The rural household's vulnerability to capitalist crises was increased in the following manner. In periods of falling prices, as greater amounts of household labour had to be committed to the production of crops for exports in order to stabilise the household's cash receipts, the possibility occurred of even this increased commitment being insufficient to bring in the quantity of cash required to meet the household's social obligations. In other words, the household could face a crisis of simple reproduction. In such a situation an initial response might be for the household head to borrow money from richer farmers or from traders. Another option would be for some members of the household to seek wage labour either on the farms of richer households or from the colonial government or in mines or on plantations. Such a strategy, however, tended to be self-defeating over the long run for the following reasons. Generally, money could only be borrowed by mortgaging land or crops and had to be paid back. Repayment of loans thus required a continued and usually increased commitment to export crop production. As for wage labour, given the concentrated period of time during which most agricultural operations had to be undertaken for climatic reasons, labour on someone else's farm meant the neglect of one's own thus lessening the prospects of the next harvest. Wage labour in the mines or for the state, because it drew the strongest and most able, also tended to have a debilitating effect on the level of production of the household farm. Thus, both borrowing and wage-labour tended, as attempts to avoid

a crisis of simple household reproduction, only to create the conditions for an even more severe crisis in the rural household.

In addition, a steady growth in the commitment of household labour resources to the production of agricultural commodities for export made rural society more vulnerable to so-called „natural calamities” resulting from disease, drought, etc. This occurred for several reasons. First, the very process of the commoditisation of local society tended to erode established reciprocal and redistributive relationships within rural settlements. In the face of the expanding market, households could rely less and less on unpaid help from outside. Second, as household heads, under pressure of the market, became increasingly unable to fulfill their social obligations for the provision of tax payments, marriage expenses, and other socially necessary expenditures on behalf of the members of their household, the social glue which held households together was weakened. In the absence of the household head's ability to meet these obligations, the services owed to the household by junior members were less and less likely to be forthcoming. The result was that extended households tended to break up and become more nuclear in character. Nuclear households with their smaller number of members and thus smaller overall labour resources were, in turn, more vulnerable to periods of drought or illness, more vulnerable to crises of simple household reproduction.

Periods of crises of simple household reproduction generated by market or „natural” causes occurred frequently during the period of colonial rule and continued under independent African governments. The weaker households and their members were literally thrown off of the countryside — having become, in the words of one writer, „too poor to farm”. Many of these former agricultural producers ended up in the increasingly overcrowded urban centres of Africa as food consumers living a precarious hand-to-mouth existence in slums and shanties.

It is our contention that this trend, already observable during the colonial period, became more pronounced after independence for reasons which stem from our understanding of the evolution of Africa's ruling groups and their logic of reproduction. For these ruling groups, the household/family based agricultural sector served as a milk cow for „development” or the redistribution of the GNP necessary for the formation and reproduction of the ruling group. Rather than being an outgrowth of them, as Hyden maintains, the post-colonial states of Africa and the ruling groups which controlled them came into greater and greater contradiction with the family/household based units of agricul-



tural production which provided the financial wherewithal for the social reproduction of both those states and ruling groups.

#### CONCLUSION

The question which emerges is whether in the eyes of capital the game of exploiting the African continent is still worth the candle.

Let us attempt to answer this question by offering the following prognosis. We can, we think, see three roads for the majority of African states. Some states which are either of geo-political importance, such as the Sudan, or within whose boundaries there is to be found a particularly strategic resource will continue to be propped up, thus giving the now present ruling group a renewed, if tenuous, lease on life. States without such a position will be faced with two choices. Either they will have to massively reorder their legal, economic and political systems so as to permit a new basis for capitalist accumulation to be created or they will become the international equivalent of the long-term „structurally unemployed” populations which now haunt most advanced capitalist economies. In either of the latter two cases, the bases of the social reproduction of the ruling group will of necessity be undercut. It is to the question of the political results of such a destruction of the groups which have held power in Africa since independence that further analysis must turn.

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