

RELEVANT THEORY: PRODUCTION AND CLASS FORMATION
IN THEIR SOCIETAL-HISTORICAL SETTINGS

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The importance of agricultural production in Africa and throughout the Third World is at once an obvious and a primary fact. It is the basis of a country's economic and social reality whether expressed as the leading sector in gross national production, in the value of exports, or in the way of life of the great majority of the people, or in all three. As cash crops like "King Cocoa" in Ghana, coffee in Kenya, cotton in the Sudan, or as the grains and root crops of many places, the saliency of agriculture is such that three-quarters of world population depend on the products of their fields and agricultural labour for their livelihoods and agriculture represents two-thirds of the export earnings of the Third World.¹ The dominance of cash crop production in particular means that these commodities occupy enormous areas of many countries' best land, 80 per cent in Mauritius, for example, and much more than 50 per cent in Senegal.² Only minerals and petro-chemical production - copper in Zambia, oil in Nigeria - rivals agriculture in export earnings but not in people's livelihood, while manufacturing is important, especially as part of more integrated, autonomous economies, only in the past and present settler states, Zimbabwe and South Africa particularly. This is not gainsaid by declines in agricultural production, for where and when this is not uncommonly experienced it is often accompanied by increased importations of food or by famine or both; cereals imports to Africa have increased four-fold in recent years, with the Sahel countries experiencing an increasing grain deficit before the 1973-74 drought.³ By sharp contrast, the true distinctiveness of South Africa (and to a lesser extent Zimbabwe) is found in its possession of advanced manufacturing and agricultural capacity together, that it comes close to being one of the world's few "granary" countries, a producer of a surplus to domestic needs and therefore

a potential exporter of food and fodder to the region and the world. Zimbabwe, with its highly developed agricultural system, was entrusted with a "regional food security plan" at a meeting of the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference in Salisbury on 20 July 1981.⁴ Agriculture is the fabric of African countries in a very broad sense.

The actual recognition of the saliency of agricultural production is, however, partial at best. The colonial powers were certainly conscious of the agricultural resources of the Third World, and a central objective of colonialism has been to obtain food and other commodities at the lowest possible price. In the post-World War Two conjuncture of limited reserves of arable land, rising populations, food shortages, and of Cold War, United States' agencies and corporate interests have been inclined to view agriculture as a lever for control in the Third World. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was fairly explicit in its recognition:

... virtually all countries we assist are primarily rural with 70 or more per cent of the people earning their living in agriculture. U.S. assistance to the agricultural sector of the developing countries is therefore, to an exceptional degree, significant in the influence it has in the ideological contest ... the fundamental political character of the country which emerges from the development process will be determined largely by the rural institutions designed to achieve agricultural development. (5)

Other agencies were aware of the United States' position "as custodians of the bulk of the world's exportable grain", and the strategic opportunities which this offered to "retain the primacy in world affairs".⁶ The extension of "food aid" programmes grew out of such assessments, and were utilised, dependent upon time and place, to achieve international political and economic goals. The "Food for Peace" programme in India in 1965-66, for example, was administered so as to gain advantages for

United States corporate interests and to control the local fertilizer industry,⁷ and earlier this year food aid to Mozambique was abruptly terminated by the United States. The "Green Revolution" derived from similar perceptions, was touted by leading American personalities as equivalent to a new industrial revolution, and worked in North Africa, in Asia, and Latin America to sell Western technological innovations and to forestall rural social reform; it brought no breakthrough in food production.⁸

Scholars have recognised the criticality of agricultural production rather more slowly and narrowly. The specialised field of agricultural science was supplemented in the 1960s by a more humanistic and political agronomy typified by the work of Rene Dumont. This was followed in the 1970s by a series of national agricultural histories by Ranger, van Zwanenberg, and Iliffe, and by the economic history of van Zwanenberg and King, focussing on east and southern Africa. Only near the end of the decade was agriculture being seen more clearly as both a changing way of life and a dynamic system of production with international and national linkages. This interdisciplinary, historical, and materialist approach was represented by Palmer and Parson's The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa, which brought together leading researchers in the field, and in Iliffe's studies of "the origins of rural capitalism" and "the creation of tribes" in modern Tanganyika.⁹

A concern with the origins of rural change and an interdisciplinary approach necessarily embraced anthropological perspectives in addition to those of history and economics. Anthropology had a long and leading position as in a sense the social science of the non-Western world,¹⁰

and the literature constituted a valuable repository of data on 'vanishing societies' and colonial situations. The data was, however, embedded in a theoretical approach which emphasised the importance of distribution (sometimes merely the exotic and bizarre) despite the fact that what was exchanged had first to be produced.¹¹ Almost a decade and a half before the new interdisciplinary historiography of agriculture, a new marxist anthropology appeared which focussed on production in pre-capitalist societies.¹² The perspective was expressed by Coquery-Vidrovitch: "Exchange, the most obvious manifestation of the network of relationships, reflects the internal organization of society, but it is the result of the organization of production rather than its cause" (emphasis of the original); and by Terray who insisted that it was "in production that we must look for the secret of the social edifice."¹³

One of the contributions of what was largely (but not exclusively) a French anthropology was in the identification of certain myths of pre-capitalist agricultural systems, namely those of the subsistence, homogenous, timeless and largely static societies. Logically, agricultural surpluses must have been experienced at least sporadically within a region if specializations such as salt, pottery, tool, or weapon making were to be supported by communities therein. The Shona, for example, were agriculturalists over a thousand years before they settled south of the Zambezi, and thereafter, according to Beach, the production of food was their most important activity, and other significant pursuits such as mining, manufacturing, and building were all secondary to and dependent upon agricultural production.¹⁴ In addition to the exploitation of slave labour in certain social formations in Africa,¹⁵ it can also be shown that appropriation existed in pre-capitalist agricultural formations in the

relations for example, between elders and both young men and women, and between chiefs and aristocrats and most other members of a social group. The development of agriculture, with its inter-linked, cyclical activities and deferred outcomes, inevitably involved in fact the appearance of privileges of seniority. Young men and newcomers became dependent upon elders for nourishment, resources such as land, tools, seeds, and instruction. The latter group not only tended to prolong this situation advantageous to themselves but also established their domination by extending it to include control over women and women's production.¹⁶ Deepening exploitation and the gradual appearance of subordinate classes were part and parcel of the development of pre-capitalist agricultural production.¹⁷ The appearance of surpluses, appropriation, and inequalities represented at the same time an increasing dynamic for change. Pre-capitalist agricultural formations were neither timeless nor static, although change was perhaps slower where domination was based directly on the 'natural' factors of age and sex.¹⁸ Research has shown that there was both a wealthy class and poorer people at Great Zimbabwe, there was a clear distinction between the court and ordinary people in the Mutapa state, and in the later development of the Shona pre-colonial agricultural formation women, children, slaves, and bondsmen could be more clearly identified as the weak and powerless.¹⁹

The identification of inequalities and classes over centuries within pre-capitalist systems suggests the appropriateness of the notion of class formation, as a slow, interrupted, and uneven process, rather than the classic, sharp differentiation of class 'in' and 'for itself'. Class formation was both a structure and a process developing out of

economic change where, because of the common juxtaposition of different modes - say hunter-gathering, agriculture, and long-distance trade - within a given formation, class appeared often as an elusive phenomenon in the interstices of society.²⁰ Class was simultaneously an active and originating developmental force, a point which Brenner has emphasised in the wide historical sense,²¹ and which was borne out in Africa in say the thrusting, acquisitive action of elders and chiefs, and in the sometimes more equivocal and latent opposition of the weak and poor.

Class interprets social change in general, but it also explains the articulation of different modes, most critically of the capitalist with pre-capitalist modes. Rey referred to the "operative value" of the term class in that it could "explain the present in terms of alliances between the dominant classes of two separate and articulated modes of production ... and that it would be extremely difficult to explain this in other terms." An indigenous exploiting class is always a "useful ally" for a foreign bourgeoisie because the former is "embedded in production itself and it provides an immediately available base for the transfer of surplus labour to capitalism."²² But the foreign bourgeoisie is sometimes a useful ally for the leading indigenous classes too, and the intrusion of agricultural capitalism, especially in the form of rich cash-crop production, can represent big opportunities for the advance of the already powerful social entities. The rise of "King Cocoa" in Ghana is to be properly understood only when it is conceived of in these terms, not merely as an outside imposition, but as rather enthusiastic domestic acceptance and incorporation on a differentiated social basis.²³

Class in agricultural production under the increasing sway of

capitalism and the state focusses essentially on formation and action by peasantries. It is peasants who are, in Shanin's well known words, "the majority of mankind", and they constitute the people, much of the national culture, and the rank-and-file of institutions such as the military in most countries;²⁴ they are also the domestic producers of food and of export cash-crops throughout the Third World. The established field of peasant studies is therefore important as a source of data and comparative perspectives on the later trajectory of agricultural production and agricultural capitalism.²⁵ It is particularly relevant to the process and period of the articulation of pre-capitalist and capitalist modes and to the aftermath thereof. The peasantry are the class of this process as it is experienced in the Third World. Bundy's work has exemplified the value of peasant studies to the interpretation of the dynamics of rural production and life at a critical stage in the development of capitalism in South Africa.²⁶ The rise and induced fall of the South African peasantry contrasts sharply with the formation of a relatively and unevenly successful cocoa producing peasantry in Ghana, and shows that we must consider neither homogenous peasantries nor an homogenous colonialism. The contribution of peasant studies is at very least tri-focal. Its concern is with the 'human factor', the lives and cultures of ordinary people as both objects and subjects of history. Peasant studies also represent a necessary extension of marxist anthropology with its greater emphasis on the analysis of pre-capitalist formations,²⁷ and it supplements significantly the new interdisciplinary agricultural historiographies.

The conceptualization of the changing international environment in which Third World agricultural production is based has been the

particular contribution of so-called dependency or underdevelopment theory. The early work of Frank and of Griffin appeared shortly after that of the new marxist anthropology,²⁸ but little dialogue existed between the schools for some time. The weaknesses in this work - and on Africa say that of Walter Rodney²⁹ - have since been well commented upon.³⁰ There was a strong deterministic tendency which visualised the necessary perpetuation of dependency in the Third World, and in its earlier formulations there was a neglect of production and of class. Dependency was basically a theory of international relations focussing on a rising European capitalism, from approximately the 1500s and after, and on the broad outlines of the consequences for the Third World. It was suggestive of the main political and economic features of the external environment in which most Third World countries are placed, and as such it still has a contribution to make. Dependency theory certainly did recognise the saliency of commodity exports throughout most of the Third World, while it dealt less well with the changing social relations of agricultural production in general and in specific countries.

The emphasis on mode of production analysis, perhaps the special contribution of marxist anthropology, facilitated a much more systematic and detailed investigation of domestic change. Mode of production attempts to identify key social totalities, their constituent parts and changing interrelationships, with some precision. O'Laughlin said that the concept is used "both to define conceptually a particular dialectical (and therefore dynamic) unity of forces and relations of production and, at a different level of abstraction, to delimit a period of history dominated by a particular mode of production."³¹ The term social formation additionally is utilised partly in order to avoid deceptive suggestions of unity and cohesiveness often conveyed by the term society, and also

as a "relational system[s] composed of superstructure and a determinant economic base which may itself be a complex articulation of more than a single mode of production."³² The complex articulation or the inter-linked combination of different modes is, as already recognised, the characterising feature of most Third World social formations in the contemporary period. "Determination" within and between these modes is usually understood as a "setting of limits" or an "exerting of pressures" rather than as "control".³³ The actual linking together of different modes, say one based on food production for consumption with another characterised by capitalist commodity relationships, is expressed through alliances of leading social classes and entities in the different modes, as further noted above. The domination of one mode over another exists when the functioning of the former is subject to the requirements for the reproduction or expansion of the latter,³⁴ an earlier hunter-gathering mode becoming subject to a mode based on food and fodder production, and later both being made subject to the developmental needs of metropolitan capitalism. Analysis therefore focusses upon key shifts or transformations in production and social organization within and between social formations. Analysis of relations of production, modes, and social formations are bound together with those of class and exploitation, and the use of one such concept involves the use of the others.³⁵

The concepts of mode of production and of social formation are, however, both subject to much controversy and debate. Wolpe has referred to what he calls "restricted" and "extended" definitions of the former term, with the analysis of relations and forces of production encompassing the restricted definition, and with the combination of these systems with the political, juridical, and ideological elements representing the

broader or extended interpretation.³⁶ The idea that all social formations were complex articulations of more than a single mode of production was unclear, according to O'Laughlin, and Wolpe has noted "inadequacies" in the notion of articulation with reference chiefly to "the grounds upon which it is possible to assert that a social formation is dominated by a particular mode of production but not reducible to it", and to "the conditions of domination". These conditions tend either to be left unspecified or to be considered rather one-sidedly as an economic mechanism of the expansion of the capitalist mode.³⁷

The delimitation of particular historical periods dominated by a certain mode is likewise a matter of debate. The notion of the Asiatic mode has of course been heavily criticised,³⁸ and the recently propounded "African mode", described as the combination of peasant communities organizing their labour without outside interference and warrior aristocracies basing their wealth and power on their control over long-distance trade underestimated, in Terray's view, the role played in many places by captives.³⁹ Other pre-capitalist periodizations with a slightly less obvious geographical applicability - the lineage-segmentary mode, the tribal-village mode - have been identified by French marxist anthropologists, but they are still preliminary labels and, according to Copans and Weddon, "rather crudely empirical".⁴⁰ All such controversy could be seen as lively intellectual development if it did not also relate to the characteristics of mode of production analysis with its concern for definitional precision and systemization. French marxist anthropology, for Seddon and Copans, has displayed "a kind of university dogmatism", with "divergent elaborations developed and different interpretations bec[oming] more and more refined", and with "an unwarranted degree of theorisation".⁴¹

But these failings could also have related to the Althusserian underpinnings of the school and to its tendency to focus more on pre-capitalist formations per se than on the transition to the capitalist mode or dominance by it. The latter concern easily involved an almost necessary abstraction from the reality of cash-crop production for export and food importation across the Third World.

The problem obviously requires a broad conceptualization and an interdisciplinary approach. The histories of agricultural production have helped to identify what colonialism and capitalism already knew. The notion of dependency situates the countries of the Third World in their historical, global environment. Marxist anthropology has a capacity to penetrate into domestic social formations and analyse change in the forces and relations of production therein. Class formation considers the active element in development and social change and the key mechanism in the transition between modes of production, where peasantries are the salient classes, the actual people of recent centuries in the Third World. The notions of class formation and peasant studies offer powerful correctives to the dangers of abstraction and scholasticism, but the capacity for precision in mode of production analysis is important. As O'Laughlin concluded: "The constructs mode of production and social formation provide no automatic discovery procedures: they do specify the direction of analysis and help us to organize what we know."⁴² But what we wish to identify, Anderson has said, is "a set of lines of force for transformation ... [which] in turn incarnate certain values that are an active part of the process of social transformation itself."⁴³ Only the inter-related focus on rural production and class formation can make us aware of these values in the case of the Third World.

FOOTNOTES

1. Rene Dumont and Nicholas Cohen, The Growth of Hunger, London and Boston: Marion Boyars, 1980, pp.5 and 44.
2. Susan George, How the Other Half Dies, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977, p.39.
3. Dumont and Cohen, Op.cit., p.108.
4. The Times, 21/7/1981, p.6.
5. Statement by USAID officials in January 1964 and quoted in George, Op.cit., p.73.
6. A document of the Central Intelligence Agency published before the 1974 World Food Conference and quoted in Dumont and Cohen, Op.cit., p.153.
7. George, Op.cit., p.118.
8. Keith Griffin, The Political Economy of Agrarian Change, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1974, c.1; George, Op.cit., c.5; and Dumont and Cohen, Op.cit., c.10.
9. Much of the historiography is referred to in Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons (eds.), The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa, London: Heinemann, 1977, pp.1-2; R.M.A. van Zwabenberg and Anne King, An Economic History of Kenya and Uganda 1800-1970, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1975; and John Iliffe, A Modern History of Tanganyika, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, cs. 9 and 10.
10. Robert F. Maher, New Men of Papua, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961, p.6.
11. Social anthropology under the influence of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown also stressed the scientific and practical policy aspects of the discipline and was inclined to promote the study of phenomenon such as so-called cultural contact and assimilation in collaboration with colonial governments. The stress upon exchange was noted by Claude Meillassoux, "From Reproduction to Production: a Marxist Approach to Economic Anthropology", in Harold Wolpe (ed.), The Articulation of Modes of Production, London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980, p.191.
12. Jean Copans and David Seddon, "Marxism and Anthropology: A Preliminary Survey", in Seddon (ed.), Relations to Production: Marxist Approaches to Economic Anthropology, London: Frank Cass, 1978.

13. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "The Political Economy of the African Peasantry and Modes of Production", in Peter C.W. Gutkind and Immanuel Wallerstein, The Political Economy of Contemporary Africa, Beverly Hills and London: Sage Publications, 1976, p.94; and Emmanuel Terray, "On Exploitation: Elements of an Autocritique", Critique of Anthropology, Double Issue nos. 13 and 14, v 4, Summer 1979, p.35.
14. David Beach, "The Shona Economy: Branches of Production", in Palmer and Parsons, Op.cit., p.40-55. There is an interesting discussion of the meaning of surplus in John Pernetta and Lance Hill, "Subsidy Cycles in Consumer/Producer Societies: The Face of Change", History of Agriculture Discussion Paper No. 40, University of Papua New Guinea, n.d.
15. Terray, "Long-distance Exchange and the Formation of the State: the case of the Abnon Kingdom of Gyaman", Economy and Society, 3,3, 1974.
16. Terray, "On Exploitation ...", p.35; and Meillassoux, Op.cit., pp.194-197. The exploitation of women among the Kikuyu is discussed in Penelope Ciancanelli, "Exchange, Reproduction and Sex Subordination Among the Kikuyu of East Africa", The Review of Political Economics, 12, 2, Summer 1980.
17. Exploitation and class in pre-capitalist societies are discussed in Pierre Philippe Rey, "Class Contradiction in Lineage Societies", Critique of Anthropology, 13 and 14, 4, 1974, and in Terray, "On Exploitation ...".
18. Terray, "On Exploitation ...", p.38.
19. Beach, Op.cit., pp.55-56.
20. Peter Geshiere, "The Articulation of Different Modes of Production: Old and New Inequalities in Maka Villages", African Perspectives, 1978, 2, p.45; Robin Cohen, "From Peasants to Workers in Africa", in Gutkind and Wallerstein, Op.cit., pp.155-156; and Charles Van Onselen, "Worker Consciousness in Black Miners: Southern Rhodesia, 1900-1920", Journal of African History, 14, 2, p.249.
21. Robert Brenner, "The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism", New Left Review, 104, July-August 1977.
22. Rey, Op.cit., p.48.
23. G.B. Kay (ed.), The Political Economy of Colonialism in Ghana, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, pp.3-37; and Bjorn Beckman, Organising the Farmers, Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1976, c. 1.
24. Teodor Shanin, "Peasantry as a Political Factor", in Shanin (ed.), Peasants and Peasant Societies, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, p.238.

25. The literature in the field is wide but the work of Shanin and of Eric R. Wolf (Peasants, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1966; Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century, London: Faber and Faber, 1969) is probably outstanding.
26. Colin Bundy, "The Emergence and Decline of a South African Peasantry", African Affairs, 71, 285, October 1972; and The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry, London: Heinemann, 1979.
27. Copans and Seddon, Op.cit., p.30.
28. Andre Gunder Frank, Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil, New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1967; Keith Griffin, Underdevelopment in Spanish America, London: Allen and Unwin, 1969.
29. Walter Rodney, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, London and Dar es Salaam, Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1972.
30. An example of a balanced and sympathetic critique is David Booth, "Andre Gunder Frank: An Introduction and Appreciation", in Ivar Oxaal, Tony Barnett and Booth (eds.), Beyond the Sociology of Development, London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975; and an incisive one is Sanjaya Lall, "Is 'Dependence' a Useful Concept in Analysing Underdevelopment?", World Development, 3, nos. 11 and 12, 1975. "World systems" theory, an offshoot from the dependency school, shared many of its weaknesses, although its tri-polar conceptualization, of core, semi-periphery, and periphery was more realistic than the Frankian dichotomy of metropole-satellite (see, e.g., Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis", Comparative Studies in Societies and History, 16, 4, 1974).
31. Bridget O'Laughlin, "Marxist Approaches in Anthropology", Annual Review of Anthropology, 4, 1975, p.359.
32. Ibid., p.350.
33. Perry Anderson, Arguments Within English Marxism, London: Verso Editions, 1980, pp.78-79.
34. Terray, Op.cit., p.34.
35. Rey, Op.cit., p.41.
36. Wolpe, "Introduction", in Wolpe, Op.cit., pp.6-19.
37. O'Laughlin, Op.cit., p.365, and Wolpe, Op.cit., 35-38. Among further contributions to the continuing debate are Aidan Foster-Carter, "The Modes of Production Controversy", New Left Review, 107, January-February 1978; John G. Taylor, From Modernization to Modes of Production, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979, pp.105-138; and Copans and Seddon, Op.cit.

38. There is, among many other critiques, Anderson's singeing criticism and Godelier's sympathetic analysis: Perry Anderson, Lineages of the Absolutist State, London: New Left Books, 1974, pp.462-549; and Maurice Godelier, "The Concept of the 'Asiatic Mode of Production' and Marxist Models of Social Evolution", in Seddon, Op.cit., pp.209-257.
39. Terray, "Long-distance Exchange ..."
40. Op.cit., p.38.
41. Ibid., pp.33 and 38.
42. Op.cit., p.368.
43. Op.cit., p.98. Anderson's emphasis, who was here referring specifically to the apposite work of E.P. Thompson.

