

THE POST-COLONIAL STATE IN AFRICA; SOME  
PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS ON AN EMERGING THEORY

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Abstract: The state, long taken for granted and thereby neglected by social science theorists, nowadays enjoys the attention of a growing number of political scientists. Those who write specifically on the state in the post-colonial situation in Africa tend to do so from predominantly Marxist or neo-Marxist perspectives. Thus the strengths and weaknesses of the emerging theory which can be distilled, far from quintessentially, from the pages of the Review of African Political Economy, for instance, are the familiar and characteristic ones of marxist analyses. A dash of voluntarism on the part of actors has to be admitted to take some of the rigidity out of the theory. Otherwise actions and behaviour of actors, in terms of the theory, tend to be rather over-determined by structures and history. If that admission dilutes the 'hardness' and parsimony credentials of the theory, its rigour and elegance, there is compensation in the wider applicability and greater convergence with empirical reality of, heuristically, by far the most useful theory around.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the state has become the object of a renewed theoretical interest among political scientists and sociologists. Most of the running in this renewed effort has been made by Marxists and neo-Marxists. Perhaps the need to fill a lacuna in the Marxian corpus explains the preponderance of the left in this enterprise. The attention which classical Marxism gave to the state was plainly scant. The formulations of a theory of state therein were embarrassingly inadequate. But the dissatisfaction with the rather smug liberal theory of the state, and with the lacklustre performance of the liberal state in the face of post-Keynesian political economy problems, is spreading quite rapidly to engulf groups other than left radicals. The theoretical expression of this dissatisfaction

Underdevelopment and dependency theorists asked an apparently different question: Why did capitalism fail to reproduce itself fully in the social formations at the peripheries of world capitalism? As it is well known, their answer has been that capitalist imperialism necessarily fashions the persistent underdevelopment that characterises the third world, by the way it penetrates these social formations and articulates them to the core of world capitalism. But imperialism, whether in its crude, direct form or whether in its spruced - up, indirect form, needs the support and protection of the state at various points in order to achieve its exploitative ends. It was thus but a short step from imperialistic capital to the state, its nature and role, as the single most convincing answer to the riddle why a particular pattern of socio-economic power persistently reproduces itself in these societies. The recent theories of the post-colonial state in Africa and elsewhere are basically attempts to answer this fundamental question.

What I intend to do in this paper is simply to state what the attempts on the left at theorising the post-colonial state in Africa amount to so far. Given the well-known tendency on the left to acrimonious disputations and to somewhat excessive captiousness, I guarantee a certain failure to meet fully the need for qualifying caveats to virtually every generalization in the summary. After summarising, I try to evaluate the theory in terms of, first, how well or how badly it explains the most characteristic feature so far of the post-colonial state in Africa, namely, the tendency towards authoritarianism and, secondly, how good or otherwise the theory is in accounting for the post-colonial state elsewhere, specifically in the South Pacific.

#### THE UNDERLYING INTEGRATIVE HYPOTHESES

In attempting to encapsulate the essence of the post-colonial state, the theorists have put forward a variety of imagery. These imageries or analogies constitute the theorists' underlying, integrative hypotheses about the fundamental nature, character or role of the post-colonial state. The most popular conception

out of imperialism & instrumental capital who control?

Division of labour of states in Africa

echoes of the grand Hegelian ideas of a transcendental rationalistic will, of the march of divinity on earth. There is not even the remarkable liberal notion of the neutral state, raised above the sectional clashes of mundane interest so that it can reconcile these evenhandedly for the common good of all. Instead, these are grubby, materialist, down-to-earth imageries, with very strong hints of serious accumulation.

The differences between these theorists, their imageries and analogies and those of the dominant liberal school, however, do not preclude agreement about certain aspects of the state. For instance, there would be hardly any disagreement over the following propositions: that the state is distinguished by its political domination over a territory; that this domination is enshrined in a legal system; and that it is buttressed usually by a monopoly of overwhelming legitimation of that domination. But who dominates? And what is this domination for? Here is the crux of the disagreement between the left and mainstream liberalism regarding the state.

#### CLASS AND STATE

To the question 'who dominates or who rules the post-colonial states?' the emerging consensus is that it is the foreign or metropolitan bourgeoisie or owners of international capital who do. To most of the theorists, the fact that the ruling class is non-resident, resides abroad, is the distinguishing feature of the post-colonial state. Other prominent features merely follow from this basic feature. The ruling class, in the Marxian tradition, is the economically dominant class. It determines the process of economic reproduction. It determines the direction in which society, particularly class formation in it, is moving. Gavin Kitching's reasoning on this point, why the foreign bourgeoisie or owners of international capital should be seen as the ruling class, can stand for all:

Before 1972  
?  
Theories  
of Relative  
Autonomy

For most of the theorists, neither the will of the governors nor the will of the petit-bourgeoisie, of which the governors are seen to be a leading part, counts for much: everything is structural. As M. Von Freyhold insists, only a social revolution will change this fact: "The post-colonial state may foster or frustrate its national bourgeoisie", she says, "but short of a revolution which puts the direct producers into power it cannot escape its servitude to the metropolitan bourgeoisie." [Von Freyhold, 1977 p. 79]. Apart from difficulties associated with putting the "direct producers into power", (are the direct producers in power anywhere?) it is likely, in view of who their ruling classes are said to be, that the ruling class might be out of reach of the revolutionary wrath even if a social revolution materialised. Can an absent or non-resident ruling class be wiped out by a revolution? This whole issue of the extent to which the 'governors' are able to exercise some autonomy, some choice, some independent initiative within the undoubted context of the domination of their economies by international capitalism is the real question to be settled about the post-colonial state. And it has to be settled at the empirical level rather than at the analytical level, or the level of definitions.

The notion of foreign bourgeoisies or owners of international capital constituting the dominant or ruling class in the post-colonial states raises some awkward questions, particularly about the subjective dimensions of class, the solidary, organisational and unity of purpose aspects of class, and about appropriate strategies on the part of concerned third world nationalists. These, however, are as nothing compared with the difficulties associated with the concept of the petit-bourgeoisie, the alleged class of the 'governors'. In the Marxist tradition, the petit bourgeoisie is a numerically small class, predominantly self-employed, with small capital but enormous bourgeois aspirations, wedged between the bourgeoisie proper and the proletariat, into which latter class it is far more likely to fall than it is to graduate upwards during the periodic crises of capitalism.

*Problem of  
dealing with the  
extraneous ruling  
class. - who?  
Amorphous -  
expansionist groups?*

From the specifications so far, this is not a neo-colonial model. Yet what is one to make of Alavi's complaint? "Neo-Colonialism", he says, "is probably the greatest beneficiary of the relative autonomy of the bureaucratic - military oligarchy. It is precisely such a relatively autonomous role that renders the government of the post-colonial society sufficiently open to admit the successful intrusion of neo-colonial interests in the formulation of public policy." (Alavi 1979 p. 53) It seems a little odd that the relative autonomy of the occupants of state offices should simultaneously mean not being "simply the instrument of any one of the three classes" and mean also that it is the vehicle for "the successful intrusion of neo-colonial interest in the formulation of public policy." Is Alavi perhaps committing the obvious tautology that if the post-colonial state were truly and exclusively under the control of indigenous forces then it would cease to be the vehicle it has been for the intrusion of neo-colonial interests? Alavi's evident confusion and unclarity, I suggest, reflect the true complexity of the post-colonial situation, as far as the relationships among the leading social forces are concerned, in virtually every country. There is not only one, but several, possible contenders for the effective control of the post-colonial state. These range from the metropolitan bourgeoisie to the personal ruler. Which of them, or what combination of forces, actually rules is very much an empirical question.

A small beginning is now being made in the acknowledgement of the complexity of the relationships among the various social forces which are often collectively in control of the post-colonial state, particularly the relationship between the top indigenous classes and their foreign competitors and/or collaborationists. This can be seen in the shifts and caveats by a number of theorists on the issue of the neo-colonial nature of the post-colonial state. Thus, Colin Leys, whose book Underdevelopment in Kenya was subtitled, "The Political Economy of Neo-Colonialism", and who was clearly a 'guru' on the neo-colonial model, now apparently has second thoughts about the appropriateness of that model for the Kenyan state. (Leys, 1978, 1980) Thus, Nicolae Swainson sees the rise in Kenya of an indigenous capitalist

Overdevelopment?  
But is it omnipresent?  
UNCAPTURED PEASANTRY!

Of course, compared to the structures that the ideal-typical modern state abstracted from the industrial state is supposed to have, or even in terms of the ambitions which the post-colonial states themselves often harbour, these states are miserably weak and fledgling and the very opposite of overdeveloped. The ease with which miniscule armies overturn the state and assume power, sometimes without even firing a shot, almost literally, is one of the testimonies of how incredibly fragile they are. They usually lack the requisite manpower, the powerful, efficient bureaucracies, the infrastructure of institutions, technology, financial resources, the appropriate public-oriented traditions, and an active, mobilized citizenry, which the notion of the overdeveloped state might conjure up.

Regarding the centrality of the state, again it is surprising that Leys wants to demur. Some states, Leys concedes, "may own more productive forces or intervene more directly in various areas of social life in some societies than others. But in this respect, it is typically less 'central' (extensive) in most post-colonial society than in most advanced capitalist societies." (Leys, 1976 p. 43) It seems to me that Leys is missing what Alavi is alluding to by that concept, namely, the authoritarian syndrome that forcefully manifests itself in virtually all post-colonial states in Africa. The national or central government's intervention is direct, unmediated, unmasked; and it reaches down to trivialities like allocation of village market stalls. Typically that state is the largest employer, directly appropriates the largest share of economic surplus, and is directly responsible for a very large proportion of the investment decisions. Typically, the economy is shot through and through with controls, and it operates in conditions of authoritarian rule and suppressed civil and political liberties. Everybody and everything willy-nilly becomes dependent on the goodwill of the central government to a far, far greater degree than anything Leys can point to in the industrial, capitalist societies. There is such an enhanced visibility of the state that the idea of the centrality of the state is not empty.

There are at least two reasons for the enhanced visibility of the state.

the post-colonial states do not all come into being, nor do they continue to exist, on purely rational economic grounds, as the writers on political corruption in these states have amply demonstrated. (V. T. LeVine, 1975; Dowse, 1982). Shivji and Meillaissoux and others like them may be carrying cynicism too far when they read into every victory of progressive elements among the 'governors' merely calculated attempts by the bureaucratic bourgeoisie to expand their empires for their own self-aggrandisement. (Shivji, 1976, Meillaissoux, 1970) But it is hard to deny that that is always a very relevant factor to consider in the environment of grinding poverty.

#### THE ROLE OF THE STATE

What is the state with the features that have been ascribed to it above for? An earlier crop of writings on the post-colonial state focussed on modernization, problems of national integration or nation-building, problems of bureaucratic effectiveness, institutionalization, and so on. Implicitly, they charged the state with the provision of public goods such as stability, security, markets and opportunities. The state was the chief vehicle for overcoming the problems of underdevelopment. The perspectives of the theorists being considered here are very different indeed from those of the earlier, largely American school of liberal social science. Here, the post-colonial state is seen not as part of the solution. On the contrary, it is very much part of the problem. The primary role of the post-colonial state is seen as sustaining the articulation of the economy to world capitalism and the creation or maintenance of internal class relationships that facilitate this prior commitment. In the revised version, Colin Leys argues the key role of the Kenya state in advancing capitalism by supporting the domestic bourgeoisie. (Leys, 1978) The key role of the Nigerian state, Beckman argues, is to promote capitalist accumulation and capitalist class formation: "The primary role of the Nigerian state is to establish, maintain, protect and expand the conditions of capitalist accumulation in general, without which neither foreign nor Nigerian capitalists can prosper." (Beckman, 1982 )



stability, which cannot be divorced from economic stability. Capitalists, more than any other social group, even more than organised labour, evidently hold economic stability in their palm. Every government is so inextricably bound up with the political economy it presides over, and it so benefits from it, that to expect the government itself to undermine the basis of its stable existence is to expect too much from people's commitments to abstract ideals in preference to their present material interests.

The structural answer can already be seen to be shading off imperceptibly into the second, namely, the interests of the powerful. Although as identified by virtually all the theorists, the interests of the powerful, namely the metropolitan bourgeoisies and the local aspirant bourgeois class in and out of the state machinery, appear to coincide with the structural imperatives, the notion of interests begins to suggest the relevance of human will and choice and hence to suggest the possibility of a contradiction between the two types of answers.

#### THE THEORY ASSESSED.

Colin Crouch, after doing an impressive hatchet job on some of the contributions to the new, emerging theory of the capitalist state, suggests that it is possible "at the level of general theory to construct a model of forces represented in a state within the capitalist society which (1) accommodates the contributions of class, elite and interest group theories (2) reflects the extensive findings of Marxist literature concerning the fact that there are biases in the operation of such a state (3) provides an account of structural determination of state policy which is not liable to the general weakness of functionalism (4) enables differentiation between liberal democracy and authoritarianism (5) provides for the theoretical possibility of major social change (Crouch 1979, pp.44-45). The short-comings of the emerging theory on the left are implicit in (1), (4), and although it may appear incredible in (5) also.



the opposition. (Ginsberg, 1982pp 21-22; p. 113) But unless one adds to the structural capacity to eliminate the opposition the dispositional wish to do so, the argument remains incomplete. The verdict of the entire literature, however, is that the wish exists because of the need for easier accumulation by the ruling class and its auxiliary governors.

What about the ruling classes and the 'auxiliary governors' in post-colonial states of liberal democratic persuasion? How do we, in terms of this theory, explain their divergent responses to a set of domestic and, particularly, external constraints and opportunities that are fairly similar to those faced by the authoritarian states? Or perhaps the responses have not been that divergent? Perhaps the differences in the politics of the authoritarian systems in Africa and those of the liberal democratic systems of the Pacific are not significant? The theory has the effect of blurring political distinctions of this kind in favour of emphasising similar developments on the class formation front, similar helplessness and dependency in the international arena leading to similar neo-colonial roles for occupants of state hierarchies, and so on. Basically, politics as an autonomous activity is pooh-poohed. So that instead of finding it impressive and a matter worthy of intellectual curiosity, why some countries in virtually equally desperate circumstances, equally seriously disadvantaged by the colonial legacy and equally keen on 'development', nevertheless do not find it necessary to have political prisoners, a one-party system, a 'military-bureaucratic oligarchy', a depoliticised populace without civil rights, and so on, the theorists evidently do not even notice these things, so unimportant is the political, qua political. And so, unimportant to them also, unfortunately, is human volition, the capacity of the human intellect and will to choose. It is rather banal to say it, but choices can be made by leaders in spite of the constraints of history, structures and traditions within which they have to act. At crucial junctures of history, such as at the 're-birth' of their states at independence, leaders, especially the so-called charismatic leaders, have often,

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*David G.  
Agreed with conclusion  
But took apart in detail.*