

Book Review:

A Political Economy of Africa*

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The question as to whether university academics should become actively involved in politics is a controversial issue. No better example of the problem can be found than in Claude Ake's latest book analysing African underdevelopment.

Social scientists always play a dual role: they try both to describe as accurately and objectively as possible the present condition of the world, but they also try to criticise and change the world. It is the latter role, that of an agent of change, which should bring the social scientist into the active political arena, for he cannot avoid projecting a worldview to his students.

Ake's book attempts a composite analysis of Africa's political and economic problems. His theoretical framework is dialectical materialism, the social science derived from Marx and Lenin who were the founding fathers of socialism and communism. He faithfully follows them in his introduction to dialectics in the early part of the book which explains the mechanics of capitalism both as a political and an economic system. Next he proceeds to analyse imperialism, with a discussion of Lenin, Hobson and Schumpeter, and he continues to explain how and why Africa was colonised as a necessary part of capitalist expansion. Readers already familiar with Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* will find little that is new in this part of Ake's book.

Chapters 3 and 4 go into details of how the colonial political economy operated and Ake here successfully destroys the myth that colonialism may have been for the benefit for Africans themselves. The book then proceeds to examine the post-colonial stage in Africa and rightly concludes that, since most African governments are built on the foundations laid by colonialism, they actually negate any prospect of development. The rest of the book enlarges this thesis, arguing that "in post-colonial Africa, capitalism is the one thing that has been developing." Ake rejects capitalism and believes that "objective conditions are creating strong revolutionary pressures and that claims of progressive government are becoming irresistible." But Ake ends on a pessimistic note:

* Claude Ake, *A Political Economy of Africa*, Harlow, Essex, Longman Group Ltd., 1981, pp. 196.

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the present state of economic stagnation will continue ... causing governmental instability. ... To conceal class contradiction and boost morale, the ruling class will increasingly appeal to loyalty, patriotism, discipline and dislike for outsiders. ... Fascism — that is the reality staring us in the face in most of Africa.

One wonders how Ake can have both faith in progressive revolutionary pressures as well as predict a negative, stagnant Fascism for the foreseeable future. His answer is: "It is only a stalemate which may be very protracted but nevertheless transitional. In the long run, objective conditions are more likely to move Africa towards socialism." Is this the inevitability of gradualness?

The above summarises Ake's main thesis. The book's style is generally clear and provides tertiary level social science students with an introduction to applied Marxist theory.

A problem is Ake's analysis of causes of African underdevelopment. He says:

It was mainly because the development of productive forces stagnated at a certain stage in African history that the colonisers were able to subordinate the continent.

This wholly contradicts Rodney's hypothesis, backed by very comprehensive historical data, that colonisation *caused* the stagnation of Africa's productive forces, rather than stagnation leading to colonisation. Was Africa developing before colonisation or was it stagnant?

One of the book's weaknesses is its almost complete failure to explain what is meant by socialism, a system which the author believes will inevitably replace capitalism. Having been told that socialism is only a remote probability, the bourgeois reader can now relax comfortably with no fear of losing his class identity and privileges.

Ake could have helped the students by explaining that socialism is as much a multinational concept as is capitalism. He could have referred to Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* which urges workers of *the world* (not of a continent or a country) to unite against *the world's* enemy, capitalism. While Ake rightly criticises the Fascist dead-end into which nationalism and xenophobia lead us, he himself feels it right to focus only on Africa. Is that not another expression of the very patriotism and nationalism which he so strongly deprecates? Does he believe that the proletariat of Africa have so little in common with the proletariat of the U.S.A., Japan or Brazil? It is thus difficult to believe Ake's claim that:

this book is not so much a study of the African economy as of the total society. ... Unless we first understand the world, we cannot be effective in the enterprise of changing it.

In Ake's analysis, "the world" is Africa and its relations with "the West." He thus appeals to the nationalism he condemns. If he really is as

scathingly critical of Western social science as he suggests, why does he focus almost exclusively on the process by which "the West" integrated Africa into its empire? After all, dialectical materialism is a tool for forging socialism. Does Ake help his students to confront the global enemy on a global scale?

The book appears to contain certain inconsistencies. If he really believes that "capitalism is the one thing that has been developing," how can Ake also maintain that the ruling class's "eclecticism of course underlines the fact that they are running out of ideas." Could one not say that the ruling class is full of bright ideas about how to implement capitalism? Ake seems unsure whether capitalism is really working in Africa. He thinks that:

The tendency to accumulate through the use of state power rather than through productive activities makes post-colonial capitalism less conducive to the development of productive forces and the increase of surplus.

But he seems to overlook such African capitalism growth "miracles" as South Africa and the Ivory Coast, which are undoubtedly "success stories" by World Bank standards. Why should Nigeria not follow their direction? He sees the African state as having only limited potential "for making the socio-economic formation more coherent," thus appearing to ignore the remarkable success with which the state in countries like France and Japan virtually took over the running of national capitalism. There is no reason why Ake should believe in the continued fragility of African governments in this respect, and in the consequent stagnation of their economies. Fascism can be perfectly compatible with booming business, as it was in Nazi Germany.

Ake's predictions for the future are based on continuity of present trends. To that extent, the book could be described as conservative. He foresees socialism only in the distant future (he is rightly sceptical of so-called "socialisms" that have manifested themselves in some parts of the world so far) and he therefore seems cautious to enter the political arena and thus become an agent of change.

African Philosophy — An Introduction to the Main Philosophical Trends in Contemporary Africa*

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In his foreword to the book one of the authors, Professor E.A. Ruch, states as follows:

only an African can properly understand the African world-view and philosophy of life. Only a sympathetic outsider can communicate to other outsiders a certain insight into this world-view in a language which is intelligible to other non-Africans. (p. 5).

The book which is before us for review is the outcome of an attempt at realizing the above statement. It is testimony to openness to ideas and an acceptance that philosophy is always in search of truth and never regards any answers as final but leaves its present conclusions open to criticism and review. That the two authors agreed to present their different stands on African Philosophy side by side, even when they contradict each other, shows an intellectual maturity deserving commendation. Professor Ruch, a European, evidently is the "outsider" while Dr. Anyanwu, an African, is the "insider" in this exercise.

I hasten to add that it does not necessarily hold that the "outsider" must be a non-African and the "insider" an African. It may happen that a non-African may be the "insider" and an African the "outsider." By this I mean that what is central is *understanding a system* in an objective philosophical manner. Father Placid Tempels in his work *Bantu Philosophy* is a good example of an "outsider" who both understands and "communicates his convictions, his beliefs and his enthusiasm to those who do not share them" (p. 5). The contribution of this book to African Philosophy depends not so much on which of the two authors is an "outsider" or "insider," but on precisely how much each author understands about what African Philosophy means.

The book is divided into an introduction, four main parts and a bibliography. At the conclusion of each part by the major author (Professor Ruch), Dr. Anyanwu contributes a lengthy essay which outlines his own views.

* E.A. Ruch and K.C. Anyanwu, *African Philosophy: An Introduction to the Main Philosophical Trends in Contemporary Africa*, Rome, Catholic Book Agency, 1981, pp. 414.

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