

PEASANT PRODUCTION AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT: THE
CASE OF COLONIAL KENYA

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Underdevelopment theory is under some attack, from those who feel it is still too much tied up with development theory. It accepts the development theorists' formulation of the problem, that is, as the word "underdevelopment" implies, a relative lack of something called "development". It also has a tendency to become involved in a geometrical pattern of circles within circles, that is, the trajectories of satellites and satellites of satellites. It is interesting that Baran does not use the word "underdevelopment" and Amin wishes he did not have to.¹ A concern with linkages should not override a concern with modes of production, whose concrete and specific study French Marxists like Meillassoux and Terray are calling for.² But the two concerns have been carefully related by Amin, who defines the subject matter of underdevelopment theory as the transition from pre-capitalist social formations to the social

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formations of peripheral capitalism; in other words the transition from a pre-capitalist mode of production to a capitalist mode of production in the special (but not usual) circumstances of the imposition of uni-directional and unequal linkages as a result of aggression by external capitalist forces.³ If we can avoid reifying these forces, underdevelopment theory still has a lot to teach us.

Probably as a result of the justifiable concern of writers with the problems of industrialisation and the lack of it, underdevelopment theory has seldom been applied to agriculture in Africa,⁴ and even less to peasant agriculture in Kenya. This seems to me to have been caused by the fact that the existing literature accepts, explicitly or implicitly the colonial assumption that production for export is what matters both to the society as a whole and to the farmer in particular. It follows from this that development consists of the introduction of export crop farming, either by the arrival of planters or settlers, or by the creation of peasant cash-crop agriculture. But this was in effect either the alienation of land from production for peasants' needs to production for the needs of others, or the transfer of peasant labour from crop which have use-value to crops which have exchange value. The deduction

that this process is beneficial is made from the point of view of a non-peasant, a consumer rather than a producer. Analysis from a different point of view is necessary.

The existing literature has until very recently been united in the holding of the pre-conception that what is of concern to historians of agriculture in Kenya is export-oriented farming. They are divided only in whether they ignore or deride pre-colonial agriculture. On this subject, much could be done on the lines mapped out by Kjekshus for Tanganyika through studying the explorers' accounts without the established prejudices.⁵ Such research has not yet been carried out for Kenya.

On colonial agriculture the literature is virtually a song in praise of the Swynnerton Plan, which proposed to remove the obstacles which had been placed in the way of the transfer of peasant's labour to cash crop farming. In 1962 Brown wrote that the main potential for development (that is, export crop growing) lay in African hands, with the condition that all those who participated in development should have secure property rights in land. His proposed way forward was to give

guarantees to European and Asian farmers, and to admit some Africans into the rank of property owners. Hence the Swynnerton Plan was seen as the opening up of this way forward since it proposed land consolidation and individual tenure for Africans.⁶ de Wiude, writing as a post-independence "expert", saw many "opportunities" for the expansion of peasant production of export crops, provided government gave peasant farmers sensible advice and relaxed its "rather unrelenting pressure" in dictating crops, and in regulating their cultivation and marketing.⁷ Brett, using the same framework as others, in spite of the name "underdevelopment" in his title, argues that the failure to provide facilities for cash crop farming by Africans consigned them to economic servitude. It was a tragedy of peasant production in Kenya he says, that coffee, "virtually the only suitable crop" for areas between 5,000 and 6,000 feet should have been banned to Africans. Underdevelopment is what occurred in those areas where cash crops were prohibited.⁸ Zwanenberg sees the Swynnerton Plan as the ending of racial discrimination in agriculture. Once it was realised that capitalist agriculture could be a joint enterprise of all races, the system underwent "a major if not a revolutionary change", demonstrated

in the development of productive forces. Capitalist farming is, he says, "in principle" more efficient than peasant farming, and settlers and planters had failed to demonstrate this in practice, only through their lack of labour, capital and technical knowledge.⁹ Wolff, while demonstrating the way in which settler-grown export crops were determined by market conditions in the metropole, Britain, also succumbs to the idea that it is unfortunate that African export crops were prevented from being similarly determined. It is clear, he says, "Africans were willing and able to benefit from expert advice and aid", but that this aid was systematically denied them between 1905 and 1930.¹⁰ However, it is clear that such "advice" and "aid" would, if given, have been directed to the growing of export crops, and it is the argument here that that is itself part of the process of underdevelopment.

Amin has outlined the elements of a theory of underdevelopment which could be applied to peasant agriculture. Pre-capitalist agriculture, based upon the production of the food needs of a society, becomes involved in a crisis caused by the "aggression" of a capitalist mode of production elsewhere. An imposed political authority, that is, the colonial state, mediates this aggression and seeks to "extrovert" the indigenous economy, that is, to direct it to production for export. The methods used include "monetarising" that economy, with the result that some peasants found it more profitable to produce export crops than food,

and the majority were more easily coerced into producing the minimum required for taxation. This did in some cases result in an increase of production but not of productivity. Following Boserup (whose work Amin praises as the first attempt at a general theory of the development of precapitalist agriculture) he suggests that any increases of production are in fact accompanied by an increase of labour. What has happened is simply the coercion of greater amounts of labour. Soon increases of production occur which are accompanied by a disproportionate increase in labour, and hence productivity is actually in decline. This situation may be exacerbated by political rejection by peasants of agricultural change; it may also be affected by the buying of imported goods and tools and the consequent decline in indigenous crafts. A regression in techniques may occur as state compulsion follows. The result of this onslaught of externally directed capitalism is agrarian crisis accompanied by increasing rural poverty.¹¹

De Castro in The Geography of Hunger has considered matters to which Amin's theory can be applied, and has come to certain conclusions which can be incorporated into that theory. His work is particularly applicable to Kenya since he considers the effects of the alienation of land upon peasant agriculture and upon peasant nutrition. Fertile land is alienated with the purpose of setting up large-scale farms or plantations which will produce crops for export. This means not only that indigenous people are physically removed, but that food cultivation is suppressed in the alienated areas, the men are compelled to work on export crop production on

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plantations instead of on food production at home, and their wives' own cultivation takes place in more marginal areas. Food production declines; because of the planters' demand for energy-giving cereals for their workers, it becomes more and more centred on cereals; and, because these cereals are deficient in minerals, salts and vitamins, malnutrition increases. Increasing monotony of diet is exacerbated both by the poverty of the people and the physical difficulty of buying supplementary foods like meat, milk and eggs. Soil erosion increases not only because the planters tend to "mine" soil, in other words, to export its fertility but also because peasants, who have a greater incentive to conserve their soil, are prevented from doing so by the pressures to cultivate in marginal areas. Both malnutrition and soil erosion are directly caused, therefore, by colonisation. In order to avert the crisis, colonisers may attempt the "politics of the full stomach", that is, measures to increase the surplus of energy-giving foods, but these do not improve the basic situation, because they are misconceived, and because poverty is not eradicated.¹² A similar process can be observed over soil conservation. In order to avert a crisis of soil deterioration, similarly misconceived measures of soil conservation are imposed which do not eliminate the basic causes.

We shall now proceed to an examination of changes in production in Kenya in order to consider Amin's view of the nature of the process of underdevelopment. Amin suggests that the transition to

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a peripheral capitalist formation may take place through a temporary tributary formation, where the possession of force by the state is a basic factor in production and where surplus is collected in the form of taxation.¹³ This appears to fit much of the East African situation in the early colonial period, when the colonial state used taxation to force either labour in production on alien farms or production for export on a peasant's own land.

The colonial state in Kenya, representing the interest of metropolitan capitalists in creating export production, introduced European settlers and planters, alienated to them large areas of fertile land, and expected to rely principally upon them in order to extrovert the economy. The administrators intended then, to establish a new capitalist mode of production using "entrepreneurs" accustomed to the system; and the state did in fact utilise the conquest for the purpose of seizure of land and the expulsion of some of its inhabitants. But it did not and could not operate without those expelled inhabitants. Settlers and planters, as indeed administrators also, did not intend to do the productive work themselves; they envisaged themselves as supervisors of a toiling majority of the indigenous people. Hence a relationship with them, and with cultivators in unalienated areas, could not be avoided. Both settlers and planters wanted labourers from those areas, but the precise needs of settlers and planters began to differ after that agreement. Settlers wanted permanent workers, planters temporary workers. Settlers proposed to use their vast areas of unused

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land as a bargaining counter for engaging the services of squatters. Planters wanted migrants whose families they need not feed, and who would be partially supported by food production in their home areas. Settlers and planters, therefore, had differing interests with regard to the so-called "reserves". Settlers intended that land shortage would be the key to their power over labourers: reduction of the size of the reserves, and insecurity of tenure or of subsistence within them, would force people to leave the reserves and seek land elsewhere. The seizure of land north of the Sababi river in 1914 seems a good example of this: the settlers did not want the land, they only wanted potential workers to be forced off it.¹⁴ A more interesting case from the point of view of social relations is the Limuru alienation between 1903 and 1906. Before 1903, 11,000 cultivators had been in occupation of the 60,000 acres alienated. The great majority were converted directly into squatters. It is probable that as many as half of them had previously been tenants or ahoi and were accustomed to that relationship. But the more telling factor is the importance of control of land. Land shortage had already become prevalent among Kikuyu in the Kiambu area in the pre-colonial period; this was the reason why the relationship of landowner and tenant existed. It is not surprising, therefore, that it should have been Kikuyu who became squatters here and elsewhere. Control of the land by a landlord enabled him to build a feudal relationship on that basis: the squatters became virtually serfs.¹⁵

Settlers' interest in cultivators in the reserves

during the period up to 1930¹⁶ was of two kinds: one, as more potential labourers, and second, as actual competitors. If they did not intend to do much manual work themselves (and many consciously wished to recreate the class relationships which had existed in their English aristocratic backgrounds), a labouring class was essential and had to be created. Since land shortage among cultivators was an important means of creating a landless group as a labour reservoir, settlers wished to increase rather than alleviate this land shortage until their labour requirements were fulfilled. Hence they looked forward to the time when population would outgrow the land made available. They had an interest, then in poverty in the rural areas inhabited by Africans and worked to bring it about¹⁶ through their representation in the legislative organs of government after 1907.

Their interest in a productive monopoly led them in a similar direction. The creation of wealth for themselves could not be achieved without a means of converting a surplus extracted from African labour into cash. This implied the production of crops for a market and this meant, in Kenya, primarily at first an export market. But producing for an export market, particularly one in which raw material prices are kept low even for settlers, meant cheap production. Yet settlers were not likely to be cheap producers unless, of course, they used virtually unpaid labour. Peasants who did not have to uphold the settlers' consumption costs could produce more cheaply on their own farms than on settlers'. Therefore, settlers

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wished them to be prevented from producing export crops on their own farms. A further problem arose over their own squatters. Since the land which had been taken by settlers was almost by definition fertile, squatters could produce surpluses on their own plots. But once settlers found that maize was one of the few crops they could produce fairly cheaply, they wished to exclude their own squatters from competition in the maize market. They worked to do this through the marketing system and through progressive restrictions of squatter plots.¹⁷

This intervention of power relations is a minor example of the way in which underdevelopment occurs. It also shows that even from the point of view of a cash crop market, peasants were more efficient producers than settlers, or, perhaps one should say, peasants operating on their own plots were more efficient producers than serfs working on settlers' land. To use the concept 'efficiency', and to consider cash crop production, is, however, to look at the question from the colonialists' own point of view, and such a calculation did later occur to them. What is more important here is the purpose of production, whether for or against peasant needs; and productivity, that is, general productivity per man-hour and per acre. It seems clear that the beginning of settler production in general, and the suppression of peasant production and the transfer of peasant labour to settler farms in particular, were both the diversion of production from needs to export, and the reduction of productivity. For the anomalous situation occurred that there were

famines in peasant areas of Kenya in the 1927-29 period at a time when maize was being exported; and an increasing panic among European officials that soil erosion was about to cause a crisis in the reserves where the existing population could not be supported in food on the existing land. The crisis was seen, of course, in terms of overpopulation rather than alienation of land, but the fact that there was a crisis was admitted. In fact population had fallen in the first thirty years of the century and yet food shortages were increasing.¹⁸

The plantation sector of the economy had a rather different interest in the reserves. Planters grew sisal, and later tea, products which did not compete with peasants' crops. On the whole they obtained land which they intended to use and to invest in, and did not intend to allow peasants to cultivate any of it for their own purposes. Also, they wished to employ wage labour. Yet the same economic factors, that is the pressure to produce cheaply for export (from those who found this profitable), forced them to employ as cheaply as possible. This is in fact a pressure towards slavery, but the total maintenance of a slave would have been less cheap than the way adopted, that is, the migrant labour system. The migrant labour system involves the maintenance of the labourer for only part of the year; for the rest of the year he is "free" to go home. The costs of his maintenance during that "free" period are borne by himself as indeed are the costs of the maintenance of his family all the year round. To a planter operating the migrant labour system, the ability of the worker's own home area to

provide his family and himself with food is of importance. He does not have the same interest as the settler in hoping the worker will fail.

In addition the planters wished to buy, rather than produce, food for the labourers they employed for part of the year. Since peasant production of maize was the cheapest way of providing this, they had an interest in encouraging the production of maize in the reserves. Finally, as with settlers, the intervention of power relations was also necessary, for no labourers would voluntarily accept employment on a plantation. The state intervened to ensure that peasants paid tribute or taxation in cash. This would appear to have involved the production and sale of maize by peasants in areas suitable to it and the sale of labour from unsuitable areas. Even that "rational" system did not come into being immediately since conditions of labour on plantations were so poor, that a peasant endeavoured to produce maize even in unsuitable areas rather than become a labourer, and only gave way when land shortage, drought or erosion, caused him to fail to produce the tributary maize. The tribute system was hence the vital part of inducing production whether by labourers or maize growers. The one produced his tribute by leaving his shamba temporarily to earn cash as a labourer, the other produced his tribute by diverting some of his production to cultivation of a crop for sale. Peasant production in the period before 1930, therefore, was a subordinate but necessary part of plantation production.¹⁹

But this was an unstable mode of exploitation likely to lead to crisis. Shortage of peasant land, as we have seen, and as de Castro suggests, leads to over-cultivation or cultivation under strained conditions in the absence of the male member of the family. Productivity declines since the male member's work in clearing land, burning bush, guarding against animal predators and taking soil conservation measures is essential and not incidental. Shortage of land which leads to the ending of systems of shifting cultivation is certain in these conditions to lead to over-cultivation through the omission of fallows. Here we may question those who, like Boserup, think that shortage of land (through overpopulation) is an incentive to an increase in production through a change to a more intensive system of land use. While this leads to a marginal decline in productivity per man-hour, the theory suggests that loss of production is more than compensated for by an increase in the number of man-hours worked and an increase in the productivity of each acre of land. In the circumstances of Kenya under colonial rule, where manpower was being extracted, surplus man-hours were not available as the theory assumes. Similarly, the increase in the productivity of each acre of land can only occur if means of maintaining the fertility of the land are present or can be provided. Animal manure, for example, can be put on the land only if the peasant owns or has access to cows (he cannot afford to buy manure), if he can keep cows near enough to his cultivated area to be able to carry the manure there (he must have a large

area including grazing) and if he does not need the animal manure for fuel (firewood is expensive or distant). Poverty prevents him from maintaining the fertility of his land, and it should be noted that the tributary system was fairly carefully calculated to give little over his taxation. Three months work was equal to one year's taxation for a peasant with relatively few dependants. Such is the meaning of the expression 'cash requirement' found so frequently in the documentary literature.²⁰ Production, for these reasons, did not increase, productivity per man-hour decline and productivity per acre decline in all areas once the virgin fertility of land was exhausted. The crop chosen by planters for their food supply exacerbated these factors, for maize is a crop whose critical rainfall requirements make it often fail, and whose nutrient requirements cause it to exhaust the soil more rapidly than other cereals. In addition it is nutritionally defective and contributes to increasing protein and vitamin deficiency diseases with their results on productivity. The fact that planters depended upon a supply of maize from the "reserves" did, however, ensure that they would try to deal with the crisis in agriculture there rather than let it occur as was in the interest of settlers. Further, after 1931, labour requirements of settlers fell due to the depression of the world market, and settlers consequently did not oppose attempts to improve cultivation conditions in the reserves carried out by colonial officials after 1930. Officials themselves were concerned to improve those conditions as representatives of the

British capitalist class who depended on cheap colonial exports, because exports were declining, and also because it was becoming necessary to import food.²¹

The nature of the agricultural crisis in the late 1920s and early 1930s was that of a decline in peasant production. Consumers of the surplus of peasant production, which included the planters, the bureaucracy and indeed all urban dwellers, were concerned. Their perception of the causes of that decline differed somewhat from reality and produced at best temporary and at worst bizarre proposed solutions. The Carter Land Commission expressed this perception quite clearly. Land shortage was ruled out as a cause, since the possession of land by settlers and planters was considered sacrosanct. It followed that the cause must be defective land utilisation in the areas reserved for peasants, in other words the peasant's own fault. Measures to "educate" peasants in better land use and to compel peasants to carry out measures of soil conservation were proposed. Shortage of grazing land was called overstocking and proposals for culling cattle made. Shortage of cultivating land was called lack of management or mal-distribution of population. The latter came near to recognising the connection of the problem with land. The solution seen was redistribution of population which took the form of resettlement schemes into areas "available" for peasant agriculture (that is, not suitable for alienation), which were usually areas already vacated by peasants for lack of water supplies or abundance of tsetse or mosquito.²²

Settlers' interest changed somewhat after 1930. Low prices for exported maize continued in spite of their efforts to monopolise maize exports. During the 1930s there were two changes. One was that those settlers who continued to produce maize asked for and received subsidies from the colonial administration. These took the form of subsidised transport, both in the form of railway extensions and in the form of cut railway rates; and in the beginning of guaranteed minimum prices for maize. Because the settlers wished to continue to control peasant maize production and because the colonial administration wished to eliminate independent middlemen, a marketing organisation was set up, at first run by the settler Kenya Farmer's Association and later by the administration itself. The organisation feebly disguised its racial buying policies of paying a higher price to settlers than to peasants: the normal methods were to specify bulk consignments, clear bags and a low percentage of moisture. But the Maize and Produce Board did in fact become a means of creaming off a portion of the price of peasant products, just as marketing boards in other colonies did. In the case of Kenya maize, the organisation also subsidised settler maize and became a means of transferring surplus from the peasant to the settlers.²³ Hence settlers came to have an interest in continuing peasant maize production.

The second change, and a more basic one, which occurred in much settler agriculture was the move out of maize monoculture to a mixed maize and dairy farming system. This was in response to the relatively

higher prices of coffee, and intention of building up a domestic market for milk, butter and cheese. This move had two effects. One was that settlers were more interested in monopolising the market in coffee and dairy products than in maize. Peasants were virtually prohibited from planting coffee and owning "grade" cattle. The second was that their needs for labour changed. It is said that the settlers needed more of their land for grazing and hence were less willing to allow squatters the use of it. It is more likely that their labour market situation had changed. Conditions in the reserves had deteriorated to the extent that offers of land were no longer so necessary to induce labourers to present themselves, and their own needs for labourers were less. Unemployment began to be known in Kenya. Hence the progressive worsening of the conditions of squatters in the late 1920s and early 1930s which continued once more after 1945, becoming a prominent cause of the Mau Mau squatter revolt. The basis of control of labour changed to some extent and became rather more convergent with the planter system. Squatters were becoming converted into resident labourers with limited or no land rights and new workers were merely labourers. Wages were kept low, indeed plantations wages were lower still than in the 1920s, pay was for cash requirements and hence at its base was the taxation system. The old feudal mode of exploitation was being converted to one with a tributary basis.²⁴

This meant that peasant numbers were

swollen by ex-serfs who either left the settler farms because they protested against their new terms, or were expelled in order to make them become migrating labourers. Surplus land was not available in the reserves, and the evicted squatters became an obviously depressed group. At the same time there was beginning to appear a relatively rich group of peasants. Those peasants who were relatively successful in producing their "cash requirements" by cash crop production began to find themselves a little better off than those who failed and became or remained labourers. This occurred, for example, whenever there was widespread evasion of the state-controlled marketing organisation through smuggling between districts or to Uganda and the organisation consequently raised the African price a little, or when war-time or other demand increased and raised export prices somewhat. In addition, after the Second World War prices for non-exported peasant products rose a little. These began to give cash crop farmers a slightly higher income than the non-cash-crop-producing peasants.²⁵ Labourers on the other hand remained a depressed group with wages remaining below the 1920s level for fifteen years or more. The interests of these two groups of peasants became divergent. The cash crop farmers became concerned with the prices of their products once the additional cash became theirs; they were therefore, in particular conflict with the marketing organisations, who they readily recognised, controlled prices and markets. More important, some began to employ labourers themselves. If they did,

they could attend to soil conservation. Harry Thuku, for example, employed casual labourers to dig trenches and ridges. If rich peasants employed labourers, they were, of course, as interested as a European employer in keeping wages down, and their class interests became clearly differentiated from their labourers. They also became interested in extending their lands, and again Harry Thuku is an example of an extending farmer. This meant purchase or litigation in the areas like Kiambu and Murang'a where land had become marketable. Class differentiation tended to be regionally defined. Whereas north Nyanza and Kiambu became "cash crop areas" meaning that there was a large proportion of rich peasants there, central Nyanza and Ukambani were labour reservoirs, while in Murang'a and Nyeri there were developing sharp conflict between the rich peasants and the poor.²⁶

Labouring peasants, were subjected to increasing pressures. If they succeeded in retaining land, as labourers in Central Nyanza and Ukambani usually did, they and their families were subjected to a host of official impositions which can only be described as harassment. Their farms were for obvious reasons the most neglected and the ones where soil erosion was most likely to occur. If they kept cattle, those cattle were more likely to be lacking control and to wander at will powdering soil with their hooves. Their crops were more likely to be ravaged by workers and baboons, their soil was more likely to be overcultivated since clearing new land was more difficult. Their plots were more likely to be encroached upon by rich neighbours or to be sold to pay debts. Gradually more and

more were likely to become landless.²⁷ Whereas in pre-colonial Kikuyu a landless man could become a tenant with relative security, now he would more probably be refused any access to the land.²⁷

Such peasants were also likely to be in sharp conflict with the administration over soil conservation. The administration decided on measures of compulsory soil conservation, often disguised as tribal turn outs or "communal" labour. In effect this meant the use of force, but administered by local chiefs and headmen rather than by the agricultural official himself. The method almost universally proposed in the 1940s was terracing. Terracing is extremely hard work and does not necessarily improve the situation. If it is carried out in the rainy season the soil will be heavier to lift and labour will be withdrawn directly from cultivation. If it is done in the dry season the soil will be more and not less liable to both wind and water erosion before it becomes stabilised again, and grass which could stabilise it will not grow. In addition disturbance of the soil is likely to destroy its structure, and, unless extreme care is exercised, with even greater labour, it is likely to result in the exposure of the subsoil at the back of the terrace and the covering of the top-soil with subsoil at the front. The labour situation was critical already, and yet greatly increased demands for labour were made. Either the terracing was done when the man was absent, in which case the women were expected to turn out for "communal" labour, or if the man was present at the time of terracing, he would be expected

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subsequently when the terrace needed to be maintained. The British officials never solved this problem. They met strong resistance from both women and men to the compulsory employment of women on terracing in Murang'a in 1947 and had to abandon their plans, and there are numerous mentions in the Agricultural Reports of terraces not being maintained. In the end their solution was to rely on voluntary soil conservation work, which meant soil conservation by those who could afford to employ labourers to do it for them, and the virtual abandonment of the soil of those who could not.²⁸

The results so far as underdevelopment is concerned are clear. The extension of cultivation by rich peasants was not in the interests of the African society as a whole. The maize they grew continued to be exported or sold to planters; wattle, cotton and cashew nuts were exported at poor prices. Growers became dependent upon a market and merchants then exploited that dependence. Second the extension of the cultivation of maize or cotton nearly always led to a monoculture with worsening effects on the basic fertility of the soil. Monoculture occurred because of the limited nature of colonial markets. They were directed to an established external need along an established colonial channel, and since the channels were not easy or cheap to maintain, the fewer the better. Also, the provision of their local neighbours' various needs was prevented by the external orientation of the markets. Even in the case of famines, those who produced food still had

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to sell it to the exporting organisation, which then resold it to starving peasants. Further, a peasant had to produce a cash crop each year. While his soil needed a rest or a change, the tax man came all the same. Third, the extension of cultivation was not an increase in productivity but only in production. The rich peasant employed labourers. The result was not an increase in production per-man-hour but only an increase in the number of man-hours, with a likely decrease in production per-man-hour. Nor was there an increase in production per acre, but only an increase in the number of acres. Where more intensive agriculture was tried as for example among the peasants of Kiambu, those who could afford to buy manure and to employ labourers to spread it could maintain fertility, and those who could not buy it suffered from erosion. Where ploughs were tried, as in northern Nyanza, only those with sufficient land to make the effort worthwhile and to graze the oxen required to pull the ploughs could succeed, and those without could not; and only those employing labourers could plant their land quickly enough after ploughing to stop the soil being exposed to wind erosion. Ploughs were a means of extending cultivation; they did not increase the productivity of land. Even the labour that they saved would only have been valuable in a situation of unlimited land, and that was never the case for peasants in colonial Kenya.²⁹

So far as the poorer peasants were concerned, the situation became more and more critical and might be described as marginalisation. Political opposition

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to such marginalisation was strong, and may be said to have influenced the colonial administration, but rather to accelerate than retard it. Mau Mau was used as an opportunity by the administration to consolidate land, to introduce land titles where they did not exist, and the resulting possibility of landlessness for some was recognised and welcomed. Harry Thuku reached another crisis of production, this time the decreasing role for the poor peasant in the system and the increasingly antagonistic relations between those benefitting from the export-oriented economy and those suffering dereliction as a result of it. The colonial regime saw the solution in terms of increased benefits for the cash-crop producers and the increased wretchedness of the poorer peasants, so as to force them to become a proletariat, the permanent workers either of the richer peasants or of the settlers or planters. Even resettlement in the White Highlands, insisted upon by the metropolitan capitalist to reduce racial tension and hence the cost of suppression, turned out to be, like land consolidation, a reward for those already producing export crops. Precious land in fertile areas could not be given to those without money to invest in it or willingness to continue to use it for export farming. Political concession, and shortly independence, were granted to those same beneficiaries of the export economy in order to ensure that it continued.³⁰

In this light the Swynnerton Plan may be seen as a socially divisive and economically underdeveloping measure. It was originally an African Land Development

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Plan to raise "the human and stock-carrying capacity" of the land, but became "A Plan to Intensify the Development of African Agriculture in Kenya". It was, then, premised on the continued untouched possession of the White Highlands by Europeans, and, like the Carter Land Commission argued that the remedy for land shortage was better land use. Investments were to be made in the reserve areas, financed partly from cesses already extracted from peasant production, in order to "add strength" to the colony's economy and increase its revenues from higher output. While the administration had up till then exercised a "benevolent control" over peasant production, it was hoped that large groups of "progressive" African farmers would in the future run their own agricultural industries and hence become a politically contented and stable community. Similarly, while up till then the administration had "protected" Africans from indebtedness, it was now in a position to enable "able energetic or rich Africans" to acquire more land, while "bad or poor farmers" could be bought out. The creation of a landed and landless class was seen as a "normal step in the evolution of a country". Land consolidation, security of tenure, technical assistance, high-priced cash crops, co-operative marketing facilities and access to credit would all enable the "progressive" farmer to go ahead with increased production, and, therefore, to employ the landless. The plan envisaged a transition period of fifteen to twenty years of continued administration "control" of agriculture through cash crop Boards,

but, eventually, the producers would be "experienced" enough to take over themselves.³¹

It is clear that the Swynnerton Plan was quite explicitly socially divisive. As in France during the first half of the nineteenth century, individual peasant ownership, while conferring certain advantages at first, would enable new pressures to be brought to bear upon peasants. The "Code Swynnertonienne" would ensure that the poor or unco-operative peasant should cease to be a peasant, through the sale of property for debt. Though the plan states its intention to provide 600,000 African economic farming units, it states its intention to provide 600,000 African economic farming units, it has been admitted since that by 1960, sixty-five per cent of all African holdings were below the minimum "economic" acreage and twenty-five per cent below the minimum needed for subsistence. By 1961 the Agricultural Department was concentrating its attention on only 30,000 farmers, principally in the Central Province, whom it considered had "the facilities available for a rapid increase in their standards of living". The rest who were not able to become richer would presumably be allowed to become poorer.³²

It is similarly clear that the Swynnerton Plan was intended further to "extrovert" the economy. The high-priced cash crops Swynnerton had in mind were coffee, tea and sisal for export. He envisaged Africans becoming the major producers of coffee and pyrethrum, and noted that, if price recessions were to occur, peasant producers could "weather" them. A minor price

recession did occur in 1957 and Swynnerton, by then Director of Agriculture, wrote that the Kenya farmer must be a low-cost producer, and in 1958, after a further decline that: "every acre in Kenya must contribute to the national wealth and not be a drain upon it ...wealth is so urgently needed from the African districts of Kenya". Agricultural officials were not usually quite so frank as to use that little word "from".³³

On productivity the evidence is not so clear. It already suggests that only 30,000 peasant farmers increased their production and 570,000 did not. The Swynnerton Plan had proposed few new techniques beyond farm planning, and even then the farm plans issued were beyond the capacity of peasants without capital or sufficient land to carry out. Brown, himself an ex-agricultural official, finds himself confronted with statistical evidence of declining yields which he is at pains to discredit. Comparison of agricultural census figures from 1950 and 1960 showed a yield of maize of ten bags per acre in African farms in 1950 and five bags per acre in 1960. Brown thinks the latter figure correct and the former "must be largely discounted". But even he suggests that there had been a decline of "labour efficiency" during the period. The yield of maize on settler farms had remained the same, and increased production had come only from an increase in area. There had been an even greater increase in employment of agricultural labourers. It followed, even to Brown, that "yield per man-day" had "probably declined". Though he writes primarily

about settler production, ²⁸ precisely the same point could be made about peasant production with the very strong suggestion of a decline in yields per acre as well. ³⁴ Other evidence adds to this impression. Very large imports of maize occurred in 1961 and 1962. Machakos and Kitui were very seldom self-sufficient in food. Where export crop production expanded, food production did not also expand. Instead it declined, as in Nyanza, where coffee was more marketed than maize and the amount of maize marketed declined. Even this expansion of export production applied only to the rich peasants who could afford to produce the so-called "high-priced" export crops. The production of the more properly named "low-priced" export crops such as cotton and wattle declined. Efforts were made to prevent the African production of sisal. There were famine conditions in 1960 in part of the Rift Valley, Central and Southern provinces and Masailand. In 1961 famine relief costing £4 million was required. The Agricultural Department at last recognised that sorghum yielded better than maize in drier areas. By this time the average maize yield per acre was less than one bag in Machakos. In the areas of Machakos, Kitui and Central Nyanza, labour reservoir areas, the department admitted that an actual deterioration in the standards of farming had taken place. It might be more properly described as a forced regression in agricultural techniques, in, for example, choice of crop and planting methods. The expensive Makueni settlement scheme was said by 1961 to be "fast reverting to

²⁹ an over-grazed and eroded area of shifting cultivation", and in Kitui the tsetse fly was advancing. ³⁵

The stages towards a capitalist mode of production were almost complete. The tributary formation by which the colonial state sought to control labour and food production in the interests of the planters and settlers, and ultimately, in the interests of the metropolitan capitalists, had played its role as a transition. Swynnerton wished to increase and utilise free labour, and subsequently, the East African Royal Commission called more clearly for the ending of administrative "interference" in production. ³⁶ Perhaps ultimately the political superstructure of a capitalist mode of production on the periphery is constitutional independence, and a tributary formation is specifically colonial. The colonial state creates the extroverted economy, and a collaborating class can be left to run it. Peasants in a tributary formation are undifferentiated tribute producers; peasants in peripheral capitalism are stratified into those who are part of the collaborating class and those who are impoverished, marginalised or converted into a proletariat. But Amin's point is that it is not only the poor peasants who are exploited in peripheral capitalism. The whole economy is subverted and whereas the forces of production do develop in the metropole, there is a marked tendency to regression at the periphery. Imports of food in the late colonial period are a symptom of this regression.

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