

## Review Note

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*City Politics: A Study of Leopoldville 1962-63* by J. S. LaFontaine (Cambridge University Press, 1970), 246 pp.

*City Politics* is "an anthropological study" in which the author has "attempted to set out the city of Leopoldville as a system, to analyse and describe its features and show how they inter-relate" (p. 7). The first question that comes to mind is: what is particularly political about that? The question becomes more relevant when we discover that only the last forty-six pages (Part III) of the book deal specifically with politics. Furthermore, that part of the book does not derive from or directly relate to the field work carried out for the main study (cf. footnotes, pp. 192, 203, 210). This is not only contrary to the empiricist tradition of anthropology, but also creates a sharp disjunction between the microstudy of "community and neighbourhood", "domestic groups and kinship", "voluntary associations" and "friendship" in Part II and the much wider survey of political parties and their leaders.

In terms of "voluntary associations" and "the urbanized" we see where the national élite feature. But in terms of "community and neighbourhood", "domestic groups and kinship" and "friendship", it is hard to see where they fit in. Do any of them live in the two communes studied, Kinshasa and Bandalungwa? If they are cut-off like the national élites at Kololo Hill in Kampala, Karen in Nairobi, or at Oyster Bay in Dar es Salaam, would not that have warranted an inclusion of, at least, one of these middle-class neighbourhoods and, probably, one of their favourite recreational resorts? Or is it that middle-class families do not cherish the idea of being objects of a social study?

One way of tackling the problem would have been to think in terms of patterns of stratification or class-formation and try to determine their correlates through any social categories so identified. Indices such as education, religious affiliation, ethnic affiliation, occupation, area of residence, association and so on could have been kept more constant. Perhaps, in this way statements such as the following:

An important feature of the present economic structure of Leopoldville is that although the employed and the élite are a minority of the population, their resources are spread over a far greater number of people who have no regular income. (p. 53)

would have been easier to interpret or to reconcile with visible exploitation by the new élite and by a whole range of peddlers of penny capitalism in the

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form of small traders, middlemen, "professional" queuers and *avocats*. Also, in these circumstances it would have been easier to decide whether the Kongo did so well because of "their willingness to . . . trade, and learn new skills" (p. 43) or because of possession of certain assets and leverages which are denied to other groups.

We have already been warned about certain inadequacies in the analysis, which the author attributes to the known and perennial problem of "time and resources". Even so, it is surprising that the available material is not used to unravel any particular problem, theoretical or applied. Ten years ago a "description of a system" would have sufficed. But in the present crisis in Western social science theory which has, to no mean measure, been exacerbated by the related crisis in development studies in the Third World, it will not suffice. Problems of "over-urbanization" in Africa, the increasing imbalance between town and country and the emergence of a colonial-like black élite are not expressions of the subjective orientation or values of the individual, or mishap such as occurred in the Congo at Independence. They are rather a function of more universal factors which cannot be uncovered by the rank empiricism, particularism and the ahistoricism implied in the following pronouncement:

. . . these structures are intelligible only in terms of urban life as it has developed in Leopoldville. That is to say, the regularities of the social organization of Leopoldville owe more to the fact that we are dealing with a particular form of urban society than with the end process of a particular succession of events, which is Congolese history. (p. 8)

Finally, in terms of historical process, underdevelopment and human agency, what does it mean to posit even hypothetically, as the book does, that "politics, at the local level, is not an activity which is qualitatively different or distinct from the activities of 'ordinary men'" (p. 7)? Does this refer to a quality that inheres in ordinary men or in their circumstances? As can be seen, these studies (welcome as they are), owing to their inveterate obscure empiricist ideology, necessarily obscure a number of crucial development questions.