
Book Reviews

The History and Structure of African Poverty - John Illife, *The African Poor, A History*, Cambridge University, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 387.

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The 1980s have not been kind to Africa. The continent has been ravaged by economic, social and political tribulations. The euphoria of the 1960s, that heady independence decade, has all but vanished, and the pessimism of the 1970s, once confined to the radicals, has now become commonplace. Scholars have not been immune from the crisis bug. The 'crisis' has become the central problematic of African studies. Scholars using widely differing paradigms have been trying to explain the causes and nature of the crisis and to devise solutions. Now historians have entered the fray. This should not be surprising. "All history", Croce the Italian philosopher and historian once said, "is contemporary history".

A moment of crisis offers both opportunity and danger, opportunity to chart new directions, and the danger that past achievements may be permanently eroded. The present crisis has presented historians with both the opportunity to ask new questions about the past, and the danger of resurrecting historiographical shibboleths. In this book Illife has seized the opportunity, but in the end he is buried under the ideological weight of imperialist historiography, which was once dominant before Africa's independence.

Independence in Africa was accompanied by the rise and triumph of nationalist historiography, which held sway until the early 1970s. One of the major weaknesses of the new historiography was that it ignored the poor, those 'masses' of the nationalist demagogues. From the early 1970s, the dependency approach gained popularity. It sought to bring the 'people' back to the historical centre stage, but not as actors, rather as eternal victims of exploitation and repression at the hands of the world capitalist system. The nationalist historians ignored poverty in their search for great states in pre-colonial Africa and celebration of the activities of the nationalist heroes during the colonial period. For their part, the dependency historians subsumed poverty under the dialectic of the development of underdevelopment.

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Illife seeks to challenge both approaches. His central thesis is that structural poverty in Africa, as he calls it, has not changed at all from the pre-colonial to the colonial and independence periods. In other words, Africans have always been poor throughout their history. If that is so, then poverty in contemporary Africa cannot and should not be blamed on colonialism and capitalist exploitation as the radicals maintain, nor indeed can it be attributed to the weather or population growth or to the incompetence of African governments. No poverty in Africa is a primordial condition, obvious to the movement of time and the organization of space.

Illife contends that poverty has afflicted most Africans at most times. It is this omnipresence of poverty that makes Africa unique and fascinating. 'Africa's splendour', he enthuses, 'lies in its suffering'. The heroism of African history is to be found not in the deeds of kings but in the struggles of ordinary people against the forces of nature and the cruelty of men. Likewise, the most noble European activities in Africa have been by those - often now forgotten - who have cared for the sick and starving and homeless' (p.1). Illife's history of the African poor is a story of indigent Africans. and charitable Europeans.

Illife's perspective bears uncanny resemblance to imperialist historiography, in which Africa, the 'dark continent', was seen as a continent stuck in a moribund state of nature, populated by a primitive race wallowed in depravity, cruelty and poverty. In contrast, European adventurers in Africa were portrayed as harbingers of progress, and colonialism was celebrated as a 'civilizing mission'.

We are told in this book that there was a scarcity of formal institutions dealing with poverty in pre-colonial Africa. The first European visitors were anxious not to be overwhelmed by the African poor. 'This they attempted', Illife writes, 'by introducing poor relief institutions from their own countries, so that sub-saharan Africa - itself so lacking in formal institutions - now experienced early modern Europe's diverse approaches to poverty' (p. 95). To eulogize Portuguese and Dutch relief to the poor, as Illife does in chapter 7, when the Portuguese were busy plundering Africa and carting away shiploads of slaves and when the Dutch were decimating the Khoisan and other Africans through commando raids and disease epidemics, is the height of historical perfidy. The missionaries come from Illife's deodorized story as paragons of virtue, humanism and boundless charity. Forgotten are their seedy activities as employers of forced labour, grabbers of land, racist ideologues and accomplices of colonial conquerors.

There are other affinities between Illife's book and imperialist historiography. Like imperial historians who were anxious to divorce North Africa, and especially Egypt, from the rest of Africa lest the continent exhibited some light of civilization, Illife's Africa excludes North Africa and is confined to 'sub-saharan' Africa, a designation of little analytical and historical

value given the fact of not only extensive and intensive contacts among African societies across the desert, as has been amply demonstrated in UNESCO's eight-volume *General History of Africa*, but also the 'Africanness' of ancient Egypt itself. As Martin Bernal has shown in his remarkable book, *Black Athena*, it was not until the early 19th century that the ancient model which depicted Egypt as African was overthrown by the Aryan model which not only sought to underplay Egypt's Africanness, but also to deny its achievements and contributions to Greece, the cradle of European civilization.

Also, as in much imperialist historiography, in Illife's book, Europe is used as the yardstick against which to judge Africa. The alleged scarcity of formal charitable or poverty relief institutions in Africa is a case in point. Such institutions are defined from the context of European history. Their scarcity in Africa leads Illife to make the untenable conclusion that care for the poor in pre-colonial Africa was poorly developed as compared to Europe. A more careful historian would have sought to analyze systematically institutions and networks of poverty alleviation in the pre-colonial era, as has indeed been done by some historians with reference to the problem of food shortage and hunger.

Then there is the question of sources. One of the methodological fortes of nationalist historiography lay in its discovery of oral tradition. Illife makes no use of oral tradition, whose impressions of poverty, he avers, can be misleading. His study has also not used 'unpublished sources surviving in Africa. It rests largely on published sources and certain documents available in Europe' (p.3). The problem of sources cannot be underestimated. But that does not call for an excessive reliance on European adventurers for descriptions of poverty in Africa as Illife tends to do. Many of these descriptions, moreover, are taken from the travelogues of 19th century adventurers, most of whom were unrepentant imperialists and racists, to whom 'savage' and 'backward' Africa was only good for European colonization. It should no longer be permissible for major sections of African history to be known largely by what exploiters and oppressors have said or permitted to be said. Their documents hardly tell us how the Africans themselves viewed poverty. In relying on such sources, Illife has failed to decipher the differentiated meaning of poverty to different peoples in different societies and at different moments in time. It is not enough to throw in one or two words used to describe poverty in a particular African society and make generalizations about the nature of poverty across the width and breadth of Africa.

What, indeed, is poverty? Poverty may be interpreted objectively or subjectively, in economic and material terms or in non-economic and non-material terms. The objective interpretation would emphasize the extent to which the physiological needs of such things as food, clothing, shelter, water and sanitation are met to prevent ill-health, undernourishment and the like. The ques-

tion would then be what is adequate and who determines that? The subjective interpretation would emphasize the satisfaction of people's wants as perceived by the people themselves in any given society at a particular point in time. A non-economic and non-material interpretation would emphasize the socio-political content of poverty by considering such issues as the mechanisms of individual and group participation in the economic and political process. A comprehensive theory of poverty would have to combine all these elements and also be cognizant of the fact that both absolute and relative poverty change with changing historical conditions.

This is where Illife's book ultimately fails. It does not give us a comprehensive definition of what is meant by poverty. By poverty Illife seems to mean physical want and incapacitation. Illife's poor are generally the sick, epitomized by victims of leprosy. Leprosy is even given its own chapter (Chapter 12), which makes quite interesting reading. But there is a danger of making poverty conterminous with disease. While it is true that disease generally discriminates against the poor, there are also diseases which favour the rich or come with increased affluence. In any case, the eradication of disease need not entail the eradication of poverty. Disease aetiology is much as biological as it is a social phenomenon, and the ability or failure to cure it should be sought within both the therapeutic and social system. In the case of leprosy, as Illife himself notes, modern understanding of this disease only dates from the late 19th century, and the nature of the disease is still not fully understood up till now. The case for making it the barometer of African poverty is therefore rather dubious.

Illife's thesis rests on a distinction which is made between structural and conjunctural poverty. Structural poverty refers to 'the long-term poverty of individuals due to their personal or social circumstances, and conjunctural poverty,... is the temporary poverty into which ordinary self-sufficient people may be thrown by crisis' (p. 4). The dichotomization between 'structure' and 'conjuncture' is too contrived. Conjunctural poverty, to use Illife's terminology, has structural underpinnings, and, in turn, structural poverty is a cumulative process of conjunctural poverty. In short, poverty is an integral part of the social process; Thus to argue that structural poverty in Africa has remained the same throughout the centuries to the present is tantamount to saying that the social process has remained unchanged, which is of course untrue.

Illife also contends that there is a distinction 'between the structural poverty characteristic of societies with relatively ample resources, especially land, and that characteristic of societies where such resources are scarce. In land-rich societies the very poor are characterized by those who lack access to labour needed to exploit land - both their own... and the labour of others' (p. 4). Unfortunately, he does not see it fit to discuss the structure and process of labour organization in pre-colonial Africa. Illife's characterization of

Africa as a land-rich continent rests on Goody's disputed contention that this was one of the major differences between Africa and Europe; the latter was apparently land-poor. Such a generalization does little justice to the varied and complex land tenure systems in pre-colonial Africa, which it should be added, changed over time in response to changing economic, social and political conditions. It is absurd to think of Egypt, for example, as having been land-rich. But then Illife ignores such awkward cases. And we may ask: if structural poverty in Africa in the 1980s is still what it was centuries back, does that mean Africa is still as land-rich now as it was then? The absurdity of such a proposition is only too obvious. Illife's claim that the nature and causes of poverty in pre-colonial Africa, and indeed most of Africa to this day, 'had little to do with technology, landownership, intensive agriculture, or even (in a direct sense) the pattern of social stratification, although these did affect the behaviour of the poor' (p. 4) sounds like a miserable joke. If none of these things had nothing to do with poverty, then what did? Nature or the African's congenital backwardness? This is not serious history.

What is remarkable for a book that makes such grand claims for itself as the first to chart the history of poverty in Africa is that the theoretical discussion of poverty is so anaemic, confined to just about two pages in an introductory chapter of eight pages. The rest of the book is an empiricist catalogue of examples of poverty in 'sub-saharan' or 'Tropical' Africa and the various attempts, especially by Europeans, to deal with it.

Predictably, the story begins in Ethiopia, the scene of so much suffering during the famines of the early 1970s and 1980s. Ethiopia's poverty appears timeless, unaffected by changes in production structures, social relations, and political institutions, which are not discussed in any coherent manner. There is even no discussion of the development and impact of Ethiopian feudalism on poverty formation. Christian Ethiopia, we are told, placed poverty at the centre of its culture. And yet there was such little institutionalized care for the poor. The explanation is sought in the bilateral family structure of the dominant Amhara people. We are reminded that 'bilateral societies are characteristically individualistic and mobile, both socially and geographically. This was so among the Amhara' (p. 15). This is the language of an anthropologist not a seasoned historian. Not surprisingly, the author jumps freely from the 16th to the 20th century, unencumbered by the movement of time or the historical process.

Chapter 3 is on poverty within the Islamic tradition. The story continues in its by now familiar pattern. The question that bothers one is: why did the author choose religion as his analytical framework in chapter 2 and 3. Was religion in these societies the determining factor in the productive and distributive system? In the subsequent chapters dealing with the non-Christian and non-Islamic societies the author had to find another analytical framework since it was difficult to find an adequate religious appellation. So in

Chapter 4 he discusses 'poverty and power' in societies beyond the influence of Christianity and Islam, and in Chapter 5 he examines poverty and pastoralism. Then in Chapter 6 he singles out the 'Yoruba and Igbo' for discussion, for the simple reason that 'they are especially well-documented. Anglican missionaries and evangelists lived among the Yoruba from 1845... Anglican missionaries also settled among the Igbo in 1857' (p. 82)..

The prelude to the colonial era is encapsulated in Chapter 7 's 'Early European Initiatives' concerning poverty relief. Having sufficiently comforted us with these initiatives the author then introduces us to 'poverty in South Africa, 1886-1948' in Chapter 8. The two magic dates of South African history are invoked. The processes generating poverty during this period are analysed quite adequately. Indeed, the evidence presented here challenges the argument that structural poverty has not changed in Africa over the centuries. Certainly Africans in South Africa lost the privilege of being land-rich and their labour power was swallowed into the suction-engines of capitalist industrial and agricultural development. But Illife's cynicism is never far from the surface. 'Ironically, South Africa's racialism', he says, 'probably helped African townsmen to endure their poverty: at least they need not see themselves as failures' (p. 139). And he concludes the chapter in a similar vein: 'Ironically, during the next forty years, the National Party was to elaborate the most extensive welfare system in Africa, a system which like the Apartheid programmes, was born of urbanization, inequality, state power, and rampant technocracy' (p. 142). With only a few minor revisions South Africa's propaganda chiefs would be quite happy with this statement.

Forgetting for a moment that South Africa is, as far as the African majority is concerned, in a colonial situation, Illife discusses poverty in 'colonial Africa' in separate chapters. Chapter 9 examines rural poverty. Two generalizations are made. One is that conjunctural poverty changed quite considerably, while structural poverty did not. By conjunctural poverty changing he means that 'the great famines which in the past had periodically decimated populations ceased in the mid colonial period and were replaced by more subtle problems of nutrition and demography' (p. 143). Surprisingly, nowhere in the previous chapters has Illife discussed any of the precolonial 'great famines'. Substantiation of this point is important because, as Illife must surely be aware, there are historians who have argued that the scale and intensity of famine in colonial Africa increased over what it had been in the precolonial period because colonial capitalism disrupted the commodity composition and the social and ecological organisation of African agriculture, as well as famine relief systems. The widespread hunger and famine of the early colonial period can surely not be explained away by the fact that 'tropical African rainfall as a whole was low and exceptionally erratic during the first half of the colonial period but began to increase and stabilise between the wars and reached relatively generous levels during the 1950s (p.

156). It would seem that the god of colonialism worked in wondrous ways, spitting drought to the recalcitrant Africans in the first decades of colonial rule, and then rewarding them with ample rainfall once colonialism had been consolidated. This chapter contains many other poorly substantiated assertions. It is certainly not true that 'wages were usually quite high during the early colonial period' (p. 149).

Chapter 10 considers 'urban poverty in tropical Africa'. Again, much evidence is adduced on the process of urbanization and poverty formation that contradicts the author's vacuous central thesis. The tone of the chapter is set in the opening paragraph where we are informed that 'the poor of precolonial Africa were bred in the countryside but seen in the town. That is why they were so often overlooked: precolonial Africa had few towns. During the colonial period towns grew quickly. Observers, white or black, noticed more and more poor people and assumed that their numbers were increasing and that towns created them' (p. 164). Apparently this was not a correct perception. The author asserts that Towns rarely created poverty, although they gave it new forms. In other words, colonial towns, recently introduced from the outside, could not possibly have generated Africa's eternal structural poverty. Are the new forms of urban poverty which he identifies - proletarianization, unemployment, prostitution, delinquency - conjunctural rather than structural? Does it make sense at all to use these concepts in analysing urban poverty during the colonial era?

The question of institutional care for the poor in colonial Africa is examined in Chapter 11. Both religious and secular institutional charity are examined. Pride of place is given to the role of missionaries, and the heroes of colonial folklore like Albert Schweitzer whose 'self-sacrifice caught European imaginations and validated European civilization' (p. 195). Islamic charity and the charity practices of Africa's 'indigenous religions' (Christianity and Islam were presumably not) are dismissed in one paragraph each. Illife recognises, correctly, that institutionalized care for the poor was limited, so that the poor mostly relied on families and neighbours. But 'how far they (the families and neighbours) met these obligations is unknown' (p. 212). That is what should be investigated instead of eulogising the puny poverty-alleviation efforts of missionaries and colonial governments who were directly and indirectly responsible for the emergence and spread of new forms of poverty in 20th century Africa. The institutionalized provision of care for the poor itself needs to be analysed in the wider context of social struggle: missionaries and colonial governments were often prompted to take action by the struggles of the poor themselves. Urban welfare programmes, for examples, were partly born of workers struggles, and were not simply manifestations of enlightened missionary and government attitudes.

The chapter on independent Africa (Chapter 13) argues that the growth of structural poverty in the independence period can be attributed to 'the demo-

graphic expansion which has begun between the wars' (p. 237), and 'policy failures (which) were probably even more important' (p. 233). This reads much like the neo-classical argument, propagated most loudly by the World Bank and the IMF, the gendarmes of multilateral imperialism, that Africa's current economic crisis is a product of rapid population growth and 'policy failures' by African governments themselves. Illife, like the World Bank's Berg Report, also underplays the role of 'external' factors in causing and reproducing the crisis in Africa.

Illife argues that after independence not only did structural poverty grow, but non conjunctural poverty returned in the form of mass famine mortality. This was caused by two main factors. 'One resulted from warfare and political conflict' (p. 250). 'The second reason for the return of mass famine mortality was drought' (p. 252). Was the god of colonialism showing his wrath on poor Africans for having attained their hard-worn independence by spitting drought once again?

Illife's analysis of poverty in independent Africa clearly echoes the conservative or neo-classical critique of the poor economic performance of independent African states. Indeed, this book can be considered as the historical version of the Berg Report. But Illife does not of course think that he is a right-wing ideologue. In his concluding paragraph he criticises both the left and the right for misunderstanding the nature of African poverty. 'Men of the left', he states, commonly misconceived (poverty) as a recent phenomenon due to colonial and capitalist exploitation. Men of the right misconceived it as a recent phenomenon due to the weather or population growth or the incompetence of African governments. Few realised that conjunctural poverty had changed during the twentieth century. Fewer still realised how much of structural poverty had not changed at all' (p. 259).

Illife's own analysis of the current crisis, as noted above, puts him squarely among the 'men of the right'. His entire thesis is, in fact, the final vindication of these men's contention that Africa's crisis of underdevelopment and poverty is a product of unfavourable internal factors. Illife has carried the argument to its logical conclusion: the internal factors are deeply rooted in Africa's history. Independence brought to an end the brief interlude of enlightened foreign rule, during which the 'conjunctural poverty' of famine was contained, and Africa returned to her isolated and splendid eternal poverty. This, then, is the ideological message of this book. Historians are not above the fray in the current debate about the causes and nature of the African crisis. This should not surprise us. The practice of history producing and reproducing is an ideological enterprise, and an integral part of the social production of knowledge, which is conditioned by the structures, forces and struggles in society. Currently there are intense struggles over how to explain and resolve Africa's crisis and reshape the continent's future. History is a powerful weapon in this struggle.

Let there indeed be more research on the history of the African poor. Il-life's book presents the version of 'men of the right'.



Julius Ihonvbere (ed.) - *The Political Economy of Crisis and Underdevelopment in Africa: Selected works of Claude Ake*, JAD Publishers Ltd., Lagos, 1989, 120 p.

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The deteriorating material condition of existence of the mass of the African people engendered by decades of economic stagnation and collapse, has continued to attract the attention of social scientists. This valuable collection of Professor Claude Ake's hitherto "unpublished" essays, himself a leading commentator on what has since been canonised as the "African Crisis", is meant to provide a rigorous theoretical basic for grasping the significance, dynamics and specificity of the African crisis with a view to overcoming it. Relying on the methodological assumptions of the radical political economy approach popularised by Ake, Julius Ihonvbere, who is fast acquiring reputation as a leading radical political economist, sets the tone for discussion in his brilliant introduction. There, he argues that the African ruling classes have failed to tackle the problem at its roots. At best, they have attempted rather cosmetic, diversionary 'solutions' aimed at the symptoms or effects of the crisis which have in turn complicated the crisis and exacerbated Africa's developmental problem. This situation is due, first, to a limited understanding of Africa's crisis which has led to the application of wrong remedies, and second, to the unwillingness of the ruling classes to effect the desired radical changes in the political economy of the African continent.

The book is divided into four parts spread over eight chapters. Part I is a theoretical elaboration of the tool of political economy and its relevance to Africa. Whereas fundamentalist marxism has been hypercritical of dependency theory, Ake cautions against this un-marxist tendency, positing instead that as a form of consciousness, dependency theory "can only be finally understood in the context of its history, that is, by relating it to the contradictions of material life which it expresses... It represents concrete aspirations and concrete struggles" (p. 40-41). I agree entirely with him. Part II attempts

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