

Let there indeed be more research on the history of the African poor. Ilife'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 This valuable collection of Professor Claude Ake's hitherto "unpublished" essays, himself a leading commentator on what has since been canonised as the "African Crisis", is meant to provide a rigorous theoretical basic for grasping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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to delineate the political roots of the economic crisis. The dominant role played by the political instance in accentuating the crisis is brought into sharp focus. This is very important because of the negative role of the ruling political class in the development process. The author lays bare the various ways in which the ruling political classes in Africa constitute an obstacle to progress. Part III treats the issues of unemployment, human rights and non-alignment. The structural nature of unemployment as occasioned by the uneven penetration of capitalism and capitalist relations, the peripheralization and commoditisation of Africa's economy, the parasitical and negative role of the ruling political class, is emphasised. Africa, it is argued, has an objective interest in vigorously pursuing non-alignment, first, to fight colonialism and second, to struggle for the establishment of a more equitable international economic system. The concept of human rights is demystified when the author makes a distinction between human rights as conceived by the industrialised societies and what it should mean in Africa. For the former, being essentially people with a 'full stomach', human rights relate to esoteric aspects of self-realisation. But the vast majority of African People are not in this position. Therefore, the emphasis must shift to a different kind of rights which can mean something for people fighting to survive and burdened by ignorance, poverty, disease; to social rather than individual rights. Part IV is a survey of contending political economy approaches which logically and structurally speaking ought to be treated alongside Part I. The Author does not make any prediction about the future of Africa. He shows an element of doubt and self restraint by suggesting that the future will depend on the dialectics of theory, practice and struggle (p. 112).

Despite the broad appeal of the book, several problems remain. What precisely is the meaning of 'orthodox marxism' as used in pp. 36 and 40? As a system of thought marxism is more of an open - ended system than a closed theory. As a Research Programme, it is capable of *progressive problem shifts*, involving changes in a theory when it comes into contact with new empirical situation. Marxism is a dynamic theory of social change and that is its greatest merit. Marxism cannot be fossilised. We can talk of Euro-centric marxism or state marxism but certainly not orthodox marxism: the term is meaningless. Second problem. There is the recurring theme of the state being 'non-autonomised' or being not autonomous and hence to mediate intra class conflicts within fractions of the hegemonic class and inter-class conflict between that class and others. Both Ihonvbere and Ake seem to subscribe to the class-mediatory theory of the state in which the state is said to be capable of autonomous, neutral action, representing no particular class interest. True, Marx, Engels and others admit the possibility of the state acting independently in certain historic conjunctures, such as in the Asiatic mode of production and under the despotic rule of an autocrat as with Bonapartism in France. The question is, can the state, itself constituted on class

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1. Please find below the continuation and end of the book review by A. D. Adeoye from page 106.

... domination, mediate in a neutral manner, class conflicts or rise above class conflicts? There is apparent confusion here, for even Marx recognised the fact that Bonapartism itself was not something hanging in the air, but was founded on the support of the most numerous class in France then - the small holding peasants. In the contemporary condition of Africa, the lack of autonomy of the state acquires meaning and significance only in relation to foreign capital and ruling classes, not in relation to local classes of which it is a part. The third problem is the organisational format adopted by the Editor which is very unsatisfactory. It is usual for edited works to carry information on the articles assembled in the volume such as the date the article was written, the forum at which it was presented and where the article had been published previously. The Editor does not do this. It is arguable whether this omission is deliberate, for the claim that the works in this collection are hitherto unpublished is only partly true. The essay on "The African context of Human Rights" (ch. 6) was originally read at the international Conference of Human Rights in the African context held at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria in June, 1987. A selection of the papers presented at that conference, including Professor Ake's essay, was subsequently published in a special issue of *Africa Today*, vol. 34, Nos.1 & 2, 1987. Furthermore, the referent material is not included, except in the introduction. How does he want the reader to follow up, for example, the work cited in the body of chapter 8 when relevant detailed references are not provided? Again there is no justification for treating Part IV separately from Part I since both are a continuum dealing with the same subject: the theoretical and methodological concerns of political economy and their application to Africa. Finally there are countless typographical errors. It is important that these problems are taken care of in a subsequent edition. Exceptional care should also be taken to avoid these pitfalls in the proposed second volume of the series.

Undoubtedly it is a useful collection which must interest anyone concerned with the present and future condition of Africa. Unfortunately the exceptionally high price at which this slim volume is offered for sale (N30.00) will surely restrict its appeal. I wish the Editor could do something about this.

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