

Some notes on social stratification and social change in Africa : some theoretical considerations

Fawzy Mansour *

THE COLONIAL AND THE PERIPHERAL SOCIAL FORMATIONS : A DISTINCTION

1. To take stock of the social structure in any given country it is necessary to identify the various modes of production which exist within that country, then study how these modes interact with one another and produce a single, specific social formation, that is a system for the extraction, transfer and circulation of surplus between the various social classes or groups living in that country.

2. With African countries, however, it is necessary to go a step further and consider the place they occupy within the world economic system. Indeed, without taking that step, it would not make much sense to speak in general about social stratification in Africa, for a continent is merely a geographical, not a social entity. What makes it legitimate to speak in general about social stratification in Africa are the facts :

- a) that all African countries shared a common part of colonial domination, which marked them all with the imprint of what can be called the colonial social formation ;
- b) that they are all still part of the world capitalist system ; hence, in spite of important variations in form of social structure, they all belong to one and the same social formation : the peripheral social formation ;
- c) that the international connection of African economies is so important that what is happening with respect to it can be taken when every other test fails or leads to ambiguities, as a pretty good indication of the type of social stratification prevailing within each country.

(*) Professor at IDEP, Dakar, Senegal.

3. Both the colonial and the peripheral social formation can only be understood in terms of the more complex social formation to which they belong : the evolving world capitalist system. They are both an integral part of that system, by virtue of the fact that surplus was and is regularly and systematically transferred from them to the advanced part of the system. They differ, however, in that whereas surplus transfer from the colonial social formation was based *in the last report* on the *political domination* by one part of the system over the other, surplus transfer from the peripheral social formation to the center of the world capitalist system is now essentially based on *economic constraints*, that is on the peculiar relationships which economically bind both parts of the system to one another, and the peculiar type of class alignments and class contradictions which goes which that bond (1).

THE GENERAL AND THE SPECIFIC IN STUDYING AFRICAN SOCIAL FORMATIONS

4. It is, however, in some aspects of internal social stratification and social transformation that we are here interested, not in modes of surplus transfer from one social formation to another. One thing to consider first is the often made claim that class analysis is not applicable to the African situation, especially South of the Sahara. Various grounds are cited in support of this view. Both in town and in the countryside, tribal or ethnic affiliations are said to cut across class divisions and submerge them in other loyalties. The extended family system, acting as it does as a vehicle for equal income re-distribution, prevents the emergence of class differentiation. In addition, in towns, the migratory or seasonal nature of the labour force prevents the emergence of a stable working class ; while in the countryside, population pressure, leading to a continuous process of division and subdivision of land-holdings, keeps the peasantry at the level of an undifferentiated mass.

5. There is no doubt that various factors, economic, social, cultural and, even political, influence the development of class formation and, still more, of class consciousness, and no degree of theoretical refinement can substitute for the concrete analysis of the actual situation in this or that country. On the other hand, to seek in the various peculiarities of a given situation a licence to create a special system of thought for each country or region is to disregard the evidence both of historical and of contemporary experience and to deny the existence of general laws of social development. After all, non-class affiliations did exist to a comparable degree in all pre-industrial societies ; they still do in an acute or mild form even in modern industrial ones, e.g. religious strife in Northern Ireland and ethnic groupings in the U.S.A.

THE DOUBLE ROLE OF TRIBAL AND ETHNIC AFFILIATIONS

6. Tribal affiliations may still loom large in certain African countries. They were deliberately kept alive by colonialism which froze many aspects of social life at the pre-industrial stage and played-up tribal divisions and affiliations for obvious reasons. Its task was made all the more easier by the fact that, like all conquered peoples, the preservation of traditional values was part of the African's way of maintaining his own sense of identity against the onslaught of foreign domination. Now that, with the attainment of political independence, the lid on internal social transformations has been partly or wholly removed, tribal sentiment and affiliations are bound increasingly to give place to divisions and perceptions based on socio-economic function. No doubt in certain contexts, e.g. where for historical reasons the local ruling class is drawn mainly from one particular ethnic group, unscrupulous leaders may use those sentiments and affiliations to blunt the development of class consciousness inside that group. Much will then depend on the leaders of other oppressed ethnic groups : they may continue to stress the ethnic element, thus leading to a seemingly interminable process of ethnic strife, a musical-chairs pattern of changes of essentially similar, though ethnically different, sets of rulers or separatist movements along ethnical lines but with no social content. Or they may transcend ethnic divisions and perceive the nature of the underlying, and more fundamental, socio-economic forces that are now contesting with each other on the African stage — in which case ethnical sentiments and affiliations can be used as a convenient starting point, but only a starting point, which facilitates contact with the masses and helps in imparting to them a more lucid view of their situation. There is ample empirical evidence that, even under colonial rule, ethnic divisions and affiliations were used with less and less effect to blunt or blur the workers' sense of common interest in industrial areas. And if, after independence, tribal, ethnic or regional associations seem to be flourishing in African towns and cities, this should not be seen as a mere extension in urban surroundings of rural, pre-industrial, phenomena : these associations, in the absence of developed trade unions or appropriate government action, should be seen as essentially social insurance agencies, soon dropped, except for ceremonial or politicking purposes, by the affluent and the secure. They in no way prelude or contradict the development of other, more over-riding patterns of socio-economic identification.

THE EXTENDED FAMILY AS AN ELEMENT IN RAISING SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

7. The argument from the extended family system is even less convincing. Classes are defined by the place their individual members occupy in the social process of production, not by the level of their

income, or the way they dispose of it. Besides, just as in the case of tribal or ethnical association, there is empirical evidence that the more affluent and secure are increasingly turning their back to the obligations imposed by that system, thus conforming to a pattern formerly traced by other societies. As for the lower income-groups, e.g., the workers and petty bourgeoisie, respect and fulfilment of these obligations is a constant reminder to them that the problems of their society cannot be solved on an individual basis, even for those who are lucky to acquire a job or a reliable source of income. In fact it can be argued that recognition of these obligations plays, in the African context, an important role in making the working class and the petty bourgeoisie aware of the general predicament of their societies, hence of politicizing them, than mere trade-union type of problems relating to rates of remuneration, conditions of work, etc.

HIGH LABOUR TURNOVER

8. The high labour turn-over precluding, in certain African contexts, the appearance of a stable working class is bound to be a temporary phenomenon. In certain areas, high labour turn-over was deliberately contrived - through various policies and manipulative practices — by expatriate capital or settlers and their colonial state, precisely for the purpose of preventing the appearance of a coherent working class. In other areas, where various forms of political and economic constraints were imposed to force African labour to accept employment in foreign-owned mines, plantations or factories, it was the harsh work and pay conditions which forced Africans to run away as soon as their term of forced labour was completed. Where neither of these two cases obtained, and African workers nevertheless showed a definite preference for returning to rural activities after spending a number of years or even months in industrial employment, this merely conformed to a pattern observed in all societies at their early stages of transition from rural to industrial employment : the factory and mine systems, with their special discipline and controlled rhythm of works are not voluntarily accepted by rural populations. With political independence, many of the extraneous obstacles to the development of a stable African working class (i.e. those deliberately imposed by colonialism) have been removed or are in the process of being removed. As to the spontaneous tendency of workers to return back to rural life after a shorter or longer spell of factory or mine work, this, of course, is conditional upon the availability of alternative employment in the country-side. It is well known that in most African countries the boot is now on the other foot : it is migration from the country-side to towns that is taking place, and on a massive scale, not the other way round.

THE FICTION OF AN UNDIFFERENTIATED PEASANTRY

9. This is the inevitable result of the capitalist development which is taking place in the country-side everywhere in independent Africa, and the concomittant increasing differentiation of the peasantry, leading among other things to the gradual consolidation of small holdings into fairly sized agricultural enterprises run on capitalist principles and the redundancy of ruined poor and middle peasants who cannot all find employment as wage labourers on these farms. Differentiation among the peasantry — a universal law of capitalist development in the country-side — runs its course irrespective of whether there is or there is no population pressure, abundance or scarcity of land, mechanization or no mechanization, periodical land reforms or no land reforms. It follows naturally and irrevocably, once private property in land (whether in law or merely in practice) begins to assert itself and commodity production (especially for the world market) rather than subsistence farming becomes the growing pattern. Nor can it be argued, as it is sometimes done, that with the continuous relative deterioration of prices of African agricultural products on the world markets, the ongoing processes of commercialization will be arrested and the peasants will be driven back to subsistence farming, hence to become again an undifferentiated mass. The insatiable demand of the various ruling classes for imported goods, hence for increased exports, will see to it that agricultural commodity production for export to the world market will expand and that various tools of state policy will be used to bring about this result, irrespective of the course terms of trade might take. Whatever else happened to African economies after independence, it is greater, not less, integration into the world capitalist system, and greater exposure of these economies to the results of capitalist development, that have taken place.

TWO SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES RAISING SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

10. We conclude then that, so long as African countries remain integrated into the world capitalist system, there is nothing specific to the African scene which would prejudice the formation of the various classes and modes of class consciousness associated with capitalist development. Political independence would merely speed up a process which was hampered rather than hastened during the period of political domination. Various forms of communal existence or communal consciousness may slow down this process here and there or introduce elements extraneous to it which should always be taken into consideration; but they would not be able to arrest it. Per centra, there are two circumstances which would raise social consciousness to a degree much higher than what is warranted by the mere statistical facts of actual class formation. The first circumstance is the transitional

nature of the present period through which post-independence African countries are passing. During periods of accelerated social change, with their dislocation of customary norms of existence, expectations and habits of thought, much of what is taken for granted under normal conditions becomes questioned, and basic issues force themselves more readily upon social consciousness and in a manner which can go beyond the short-run practical concerns of the immediate class situation. The second circumstance is the fact that capitalist development in African countries is bound to be of a dependent type, burdened with the full weight of world capitalist development which is superimposed on it, hence with much less to offer in the way of solving the basic problems of the masses than its counterpart in advanced capitalist countries did at a corresponding period. As a result of the confluence of both circumstances, all sections of the non-privileged populations, whether they belong to the peasantry, to an embryonic or to a relatively developed working class, the permanently unemployed and marginalized, and even the petty bourgeoisie can be open to more social concerns than those directly arising from their immediate class situation. Given the development of the necessary ideological clarity and organizational abilities, these classes can go, in the way of entertaining comprehensive projects of social reconstruction, much further than what their brethren in countries with more stabilized class formations seem ready to entertain. This, on the subjective level, is the complement to what we have elsewhere (2) termed *the basic objective contradiction* governing social development in Third World countries: that between enormous *potential* productive forces and actual, obsolete and restrictive relations of production.

THEORETICAL POSSIBILITY AND ACTUAL FULFILMENT

11. The type of social re-construction that can solve this basic contradiction in a consequential manner is that now widely known under the name of auto-centred self-reliant development. That the required objective conditions for that type of development exist and the subjective conditions can be forthcoming in nearly every African country, however, is no guarantee that it will actually materialize, either in any given country or even in the majority of African countries, for history holds no promise of fulfilment for any particular people or region, independent of what they would want to make of themselves. Besides, in the African scene, as in any other scene, a variety of circumstances may intervene between theoretical possibility and fulfilment and twist the actual course of development away from auto-centred self-reliance. The following lines will deal with three of these circumstances. One is inherent in the present over-all African situation; the second relates to the place reserved by imperialism for Africa as its last and richest hunting preserve, and the third raises the question of the role of bureaucracy in the context of African development.

COMPLICATIONS ARISING FROM THE ONGOING PROCESSES OF NATION-FORMATION

12. Sorting out and evaluating the various forces which may have an impact on the future course of social stratification in Africa is made more difficult by the fact that here, more than anywhere else in the Third World, three problems historically present themselves to be solved together as one set: nation formation, economic development and social transformation — not to mention the closely allied and as yet unsolved and underlying problem of national economic liberation. This task is not made easier by the fact that state boundaries in Africa happen to have been drawn in an extremely arbitrary manner, often as a result of the historical accidents of imperialist expansion, rivalries, convenience or design. In mature capitalist countries the process of national formation and of drawing up of nation-state boundaries was accompanied by numerous wars of dynastic disputes, annexation, frontier adjustments and so on. At a later stage, these wars were often deliberately used by capitalist classes to divert attention from internal class conflicts. In Africa, where boundaries often arbitrarily cut across ethnical groupings, there is no reason to believe that frontier conflicts will not be a recurrent feature of the African scene, either as part of the natural process of adjustment, or as diversion from internal social discontent, or still more, spontaneously or at the instigation of foreign powers, as a means of destabilizing progressive regimes or even disintegrating progressive countries which are thought to present by their very existence and example, a danger to other regimes and to the foreign interests that stand behind them in neighbouring countries. It is not clear to what extent that type of intra-African nationalism can be successfully used for retarding the development of social consciousness. But there is no doubt that more and more attempts will be made, both by internal and external forces, to exploit it. The fact that even countries entertaining transformations with strong social content and subscribing to similar ideologies fail to compose peacefully their frontier disputes, merely indicates to what extent this legacy of colonialism can bedevil relations between African countries and cause prejudice to their socio-economic development. It is one of the most urgent tasks of all progressive forces in Africa to detonate this explosive element in the African situation.

THREE VARIETIES OF THE PERIPHERAL SOCIAL FORMATION

13. *Barring a course of auto-centered self-reliant development*, one or the other of the following three variants of the peripheral formation is bound to exist in African countries: neo-colonial, liberal-capitalist and bureaucratic-capitalist. Looking a little further into the

future it seems that the neo-colonial variant is the one that will be quickest to disappear. The neo-colonial variant exists where a local bourgeoisie did not have a chance to develop, and where political independence was virtually handed over to a group of colonially trained and colonially conditioned civil servants, army officers or politicians. But with political independence, however much the economy may remain under the control of foreign interests, a local bourgeoisie is bound to appear and to develop in the country-side, in commerce, in industry, and to present itself more and more insistently as a partner and/or a substitute for foreign capital, thus gradually transforming the regime into dependent liberal capitalism. Alternatively, with foreign control of the armed forces becoming more and more remote, nationalist coups d'état might be engineered which, first nationalizing foreign assets, then attempting to develop the national economy on the basis of an extended public sector (run, nevertheless, on capitalist principles) would transform the system into a system of (still dependent) bureaucratic capitalism. Because of their class nature and their practical options concerning development strategy, neither of these two variants would be able to liberate the national economy from foreign domination, even though that domination might change form and assume the aspects, say, of partnership with local capital (public or private) management contracts, control of imported inputs (including input of technology), of marketing possibilities and of capital resources. In heavily populated countries with a trained labour force and reliable political regimes, emphasis is likely to be on manufacture of the simple transformation type for export purposes. Development in countries rich in mineral resources would continue to be strongly circumscribed by foreign capital.

It is in the field of agriculture, however, that the most important future developments are likely to occur. More and more, under the slogan of using the enormous resources of land-rich underpopulated Africa for providing food for a hungry world and perhaps with the help of capital resources of some oil-rich countries, a united front of agricultural machinery and other agricultural-input transnational firms, transnational processing and marketing corporations and international development agencies would move in to transform African agriculture. Local intermediaries, in the form of agro-businesses, ranches, plantations, and modern capitalist farming would replace the present-day peasant farming. Dispossessed peasants who would not find wage-employment in agriculture would continue to drift to cities and towns. A pattern very much similar to the Latin American recent pattern of development would reproduce itself in underpopulated land-rich African countries.

**ALTERNATION BETWEEN LIBERAL-CAPITALISM
AND BUREAUCRATIC-CAPITALISM AS A BASIC LAW
OF THE PERIPHERAL SOCIAL FORMATION**

14. Contrary to the intentions of its protagonists, bureaucratic capitalist regimes are no more help in warding off this pattern of development than liberal capitalist regimes. Initially, vaguely aware that capitalist development in its traditional liberal form means dependent, slow, unbalanced and highly unequal development, these regimes erect themselves on the basis of wide-ranging nationalizations of foreign assets and the rapid expansion of the public sector. Yet even when these regimes are most development-oriented and « socialist » — oriented they manage to create, by virtue of their strategic options and methods of operation, a contradiction between these two fundamentally uncontradictory aims. Coupled with the bureaucracy's own class orientations and interests, this is bound to lead, through various balance of payment crisis, increasing foreign indebtedness and attempts to re-enlist the help of foreign capital, transnational firms and international aid agencies, to a pattern of development which is very much similar to that from which they sought to escape. Very often, beside the development of the bureaucracy as a class in its own right, various sections of the traditional bourgeoisie are allowed to develop under different pretexts : the sacredness of private property in land, the efficiency of private enterprise in construction or in commerce, or in tourism, etc. At a certain point, the bureaucracy becomes so inefficient and cumbersome, and the masses, originally supporting it, become so disillusioned, that liberal capitalism finds no great difficulty in renting power from its hand and dismantling the bureaucratic superstructure. It is quite likely that in many African countries *where the subjective conditions for a genuine strategy of auto-centred self-reliant development are not allowed to develop or are aborted*, an endless succession of liberal-capitalist and bureaucratic-capitalist regimes will alternate with one another, the one boasting of micro-efficiency (incentives, private ownership control — etc.) while the other boasting of macro-efficiency (a higher rate of investment, greater employment — etc.) but both enfeebled by their common dependent pattern of development.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) For a development of the distinction between the colonial and the peripheral social formations see our paper « Third World Revolt and Self-Reliant Auto-Centred Strategy of Development », (IDEP reproduction 406, April 1977).
- (2) *Ibid.*

RÉSUMÉ

Dans ce papier, l'auteur propose un cadre théorique d'analyse du problème de la stratification sociale interne dans le contexte des formations sociales périphériques africaines, en proie, entre autres, aux problèmes suivants à résoudre à la fois : formation de la nation — développement national — transformation sociale — libération économique nationale.

Utilisant le concept de classe sociale comme outil d'analyse, et après avoir ramené à ses justes dimensions les prétentions couramment avancées selon lesquelles il n'existe pas de classe sociale en Afrique, principalement en Afrique Sub-Saharienne et que par conséquent l'analyse de classe n'est pas applicable à cette région du monde ; la paysannerie africaine est indifférenciée — l'auteur note qu'aussi longtemps que les pays africains restent intégrés dans le système capitaliste mondial, il n'y a rien de particulier à l'Afrique qui puisse l'empêcher de connaître la formation de diverses classes sociales et les modes de conscience de classe qui accompagnent le développement capitaliste.

Il y a même, fait-il remarquer, deux circonstances favorables au renforcement de la conscience sociale de classe. D'abord, il y a la nature transitoire de la période post-indépendance que traversent les pays africains. Cette période, qui connaît des changements sociaux accélérés, entraînant, entre autres, la désintégration des normes coutumières d'existence, des habitudes de pensée..., est caractérisée par la remise en question de tout ce qui était considéré jusqu'alors comme acquis. Et les problèmes sociaux fondamentaux finissent par émerger, occupant une place de plus en plus prépondérante dans la conscience sociale et dépassant même les préoccupations immédiates de situation de classe. Ensuite, il y a la nature dépendante du développement capitaliste des pays africains. Subissant tout le poids du capitalisme mondial, et cela à la différence de ce qui s'était passé dans les pays capitalistes avancés à la même période et au même niveau de développement, le capitalisme dépendant est incapable de résoudre de manière satisfaisante les problèmes fondamentaux de masses. Et la convergence de ces deux circonstances amène les sections non-privilegiées de la population, y compris la petite bourgeoisie, à plus de préoccupation sociale qu'à celle dictée par leurs intérêts immédiats de classe. Avec un développement idéologique clair et approprié et une organisation conséquente, ces diverses classes peuvent ensemble faire beaucoup plus dans le domaine de la reconstruction sociale du pays que ne le feraient leurs contreparts des pays avec classes sociales plus rigides.

L'auteur relève là une contradiction objective fondamentale concernant les pays du Tiers-Monde : contradiction entre l'énormité des forces productives potentielles et restriction et rigidité des relations de production réelles périmées. Il pense que le type de reconstruction sociale susceptible de résoudre de façon conséquente cette contradiction est le développement auto-centré et self-reliant.

Poursuivant son analyse, l'auteur distingue trois types de formations périphériques existant actuellement en Afrique : néo-colonial, capitalisme libéral et capitalisme bureaucratique. Après avoir décrit les conditions d'émergence et de disparition propres à chacun de ces types de formations périphériques, l'auteur conclut au règne de l'alternance entre capitalisme libéral et capitalisme bureaucratique comme loi fondamentale des formations sociales périphériques. Cette loi restera en action aussi longtemps qu'un véritable développement auto-centré et self-reliant n'est pas engagé et poursuivi avec détermination.