Reviews


Kenya is a regional centre for multi-national capitalism in Eastern Africa controlled by a corrupt and avaricious local ruling group, an increasingly oppressive country of wealth for the few and continuing poverty and deprivation for the masses. Kenya has continued to operate, since formal independence, as an ally of imperialism, a base for the British military presence in the Indian Ocean and, in the cases of both Somalia and latterly Tanzania, as a substantial external opposition to progressive regimes.

That is perhaps a reasonable summary of the widely held ‘radical’ view. Its essential accuracy is hardly to be questioned; but its adequacy in explaining the paradoxes of contemporary Kenya is very limited. Kenya is also the territory which was subjected to more thorough penetration by colonial capitalism than any other in sub-Saharan Africa apart from the White South; the country in which fierce national and class struggles were fought from an early stage; in which agrarian and urban political movements developed to a relatively advanced stage during the colonial period; and in which the ‘progressive’ wing of the nationalist movement seemed at one stage to be well-placed in the leadership and firmly based in popular support. Yet the present challenges to the viability of neocolonialism in Kenya, to the extent that they are discernible, seem to come less from these brave historical antecedents than from the tight constraints of the contemporary underdeveloped economy and, in political terms, from the difficulties of the Kenyan bourgeoisie in resolving some outstanding issues of clientage and succession. The continuities, in other words, appear to be more elusive than apparent, and the radical critique has not until now fully comprehended the specific significance of the changes of the last decade.

Colin Leys’s study sets out, at least implicitly, to rectify this analytical (and political) inadequacy. Underdevelopment in Kenya will without the shadow of a doubt, be the point of departure for any serious analysis of the Kenyan social formation for a good time to come.

At some risk to the complexity and elegance of Leys’s analysis, some of his major themes can be fairly briefly stated, to indicate the inclusiveness and power of his argument. The substance of independence in Kenya was a planned transition from a monopolistic colonial economy to a neo-colonial economy which would not merely preserve
the major existing metropolitan interests, but which would adapt Kenya both to the new forms of international capitalism which have developed in the post-war world, and to the political realities of nationalism and the demands of the African petty-bourgeois leadership. The major element in the initial settlement was land. By the programme for transferring settler farms in the White Highlands to African hands, a number of essential components of the neo-colonial structure were erected. The incoming nationalist leadership unambiguously embraced the principle of protection of foreign capital and full compensation (indeed of exclusively willing buyer-willing seller transfers) and received, as it were, an international certificate of creditworthiness in return. At the same time, the settlement programme proved for the time being adequate (not least in its ideological effects) in stemming the rapidly growing political problem of squatter invasions of ‘white’ land and the formation of the Land Freedom Army.

With this initial bargain, the stage was set for the rapid development of the depressed economy of the early Sixties along neo-colonial lines. A substantial and continuing influx of foreign capital, the rapid movement of the politically powerful African petty-bourgeoisie into the interstices of the economy, the creation of an African ‘auxiliary bourgeoisie’, intimately linked to and dependent on imperialist capital, as local ruling class, the progressive exclusion of the potential ‘alternate bourgeoisie’ (the Asians) from effective participation in commerce and manufacturing, and the energetic subjection of peasant producers to the new requirements of the capitalist mode of production—these were some of the essential elements of the Kenyan transition to neo-colonialism.

Leys’s detailed exposition of these processes is accomplished with great skill. An enormous amount of social and economic data, from published sources, original research and privileged sources has been absorbed and put to incisive use in the six chapters which form the empirical core of the book. The compression necessary to outline the economic, social and political structure of Kenya in less than 300 pages has, nevertheless, been achieved with exceptional clarity: statistics, references and classifications are there for the purposes of the argument only, with no superfluous information to render the text opaque.

The stage is set by an analysis of how, in the terminal colonial period, preparations were made for a safe transfer of power. While land was the central issue, the importance of discontent from those rising petty-bourgeois who had done tolerably well out of colonialism was also recognised albeit belatedly, in loan programmes for African traders and artisans (with US imperialism testing the waters, as it were, by providing funds through the Foreign Operations Administration, the precursor to USAID). The incoming politicians, for the most part, didn’t seem to need much coaching. While Kenyatta was reassuring investors that his was ‘not a gangster government’,* the new

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*This is a frequent formulation of Kenyatta’s. A more recent occasion for its use was in 1972, to assure the Aga Khan, on one of his ‘state visits’ to Kenya, that his vast interests were safe—in contrast, as the Aga Khan’s paper, the Daily Nation, pointed out, to their nationalization in Tanzania.
Minister of Finance, James Gichuru, was telling the Nairobi Chamber of Commerce (October 1963) of the commercial bonanza which awaited them if only they would use the African businessman in 'stimulating consumer demands and setting in train the urge to 'keep up with the Joneses' which can contribute so much to our productivity (pp 61-2).

The long chapter on continuity and change in agriculture sets out the critical importance of the land transfer arrangements, but is also emphatic that

The land transfer programme did not take place in a historical vacuum. The hundreds of thousands of Africans who moved into the former European farms were part of a much larger social and economic transformation—the consumption of the switch from a variety of pre-colonial systems of production and exchange to 'peasant' production throughout Kenya (p 64).

The major part of the discussion of the agrarian question, however, is not on the characteristics of the peasant mode of production itself, but on the economic and political outcomes of the demise of white dominance in the Highlands—and in particular on the consequences of the emergence of an African large farmer class. (This weakness is no doubt partly attributable to the relative extreme scarcity of information about the characteristics of peasant production and social relations, but also seems to me to stem from a theoretical bias which pervades much of the work, and which is briefly discussed below.) Leys's argument here is really twofold. The power of the African large farmers and their political institutions has withstood both their poor productive performance and their disastrous capital repayment record by government's compliant manipulation of producer prices, rural-urban terms of trade, credit and other policy instruments, and by a recognition of their pivotal position on the part of the Kenyan bourgeoisie's overseas patrons—particularly the British government.

The effectiveness of the neo-colonial arrangements was, of course, signified in the large inflow of foreign capital—averaging some £10m a year at the end of the Sixties. Almost all of Kenya's new industrial sector, almost all of the 50 per cent increase in manufacturing output between 1964 and 1970, and almost all the doubling of the annual level of investment, was foreign owned and controlled. What this meant, too, was higher rates of exploitation, and much higher levels of surplus transfer abroad. Leys calculates a likely net export of private capital 1964-1970 of some £80m—roughly double the recorded private foreign investment in Kenya, including reinvested local profits, during the same period. In this situation, the attempts of the local ruling class to increase African equity involvement and managerial employment, and to undertake joint ventures between State and foreign capital, had nothing to do with combating imperialist domination of the Kenyan economy.

... even a [State] majority shareholding, obtained on the basis of—in effect—a take-over bid, conferred in practice only a very marginal power to influence events, because it implicitly accepted and in many ways reinforced the private-enterprise system, which remained overwhelmingly foreign-owned, at least in the urban sector. It represented a new dimension in the evolution of
periphery capitalism, not a departure from it (p 135).

As for Africanization, both of jobs and shareholding, although these were conceived of as measures for controlling the power of foreign capital, it was clear that they worked primarily to identify the government and the higher civil service more closely with the operations, interests and values of foreign capital. The results were monopoly profits, high rates of surplus transfer, low increases in employment, and a falling share of wages in national income backed up by tight control over the trade unions (p 147).

For African capitalism proper, Leys’s analysis is in essence an extended but precisely differentiated treatment of different types of ‘comprador’ capitalist existence. African capitalists and petty-bourgeois in Kenya have this overriding feature in common: that they are forced, by the sheer weight of the neo-colonial presence relative to their own weakness, to seek accommodation rather than competition with foreign capital. This deal may vary in its terms, from the would-be capitalist becoming part of the foreign company’s distribution network, to a more substantial operator using political muscle to gain access to or alliances with foreign capital at a somewhat higher level. But their subordinate status, and the clamouring of thousands of others at the gates, also drives them to seek monopolies, of however limited a kind. An agency for branded baby food, a contract to supply some commodity to a foreign-owned undertaking, a bus route and carrier’s licence—this is the stuff of African capitalism in Kenya. It is, of course, no accident that the State is heavily involved here too, at every level from the issue of licences upwards: it ensures both the political underpinning of the system and the allocation of rewards to the politically favoured. It is in this context that ‘tribalism’ takes on a meaning other than purely ideological, as the political expression of a form of consciousness characteristic of the stage of class formation.

‘Tribalism’ is a form of consciousness, but more than that, it is a specific form of consciousness through which the ‘comprador’ regimes in many parts of Africa exercise a ‘civil hegemony’ complementing the coercive use of state power. In Kenya, tribalism and repression developed simultaneously in face of the challenge of a socialist, or would-be socialist, opposition. Tribalism served both to displace the emerging class-consciousness of the most exploited strata of society, especially in Kikuyu country, and to prevent the KPU from channeling emerging class-antagonism into a nationwide opposition movement (p 252).

The reference to class formation perhaps brings one to the major difficulty with Leys’s study. At its simplest, it is this. The book sets out in great detail and with remarkable insight the mechanisms of neo-colonial transition and the development of peripheral capitalism’s dominant foreign and local-comprador classes. But in the end it fails to provide an adequate account of the nature of the oppressed classes in Kenya and their varying relationships to and struggles against monopoly capitalist domination. Now this has partly to do with the original questions with which the author embarked on the study; clearly too there are formidable difficulties—not least, as Leys notes, because the crystallization of class forces among the mass of Kenyans has been complex and uncertain relative to the rapid and unambiguous assertion of the African bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeois. But the brevity of the analysis of questions of wage labour and the characteristics of the peasant mode of production, relative to the analysis of the
nature and class struggles of the class forces represented in the dominant alliance, has serious costs. It leads, in my view, not merely to a comparative neglect of political and ideological instances, but quite possibly to the strategic underestimation of the forces of change in the Kenyan social formation. Leys’s discussion of political struggles points quite rightly to the power and determination of different fractions of capital in asserting their particular interests, and to the development of the Bonapartist state on the foundations of repression and populist/tribalist ideology. That these two features of State power were a direct response to the development of struggles by oppressed strata surely alludes to the crucial political feature of neo-colonial Kenya. If that is the case, then a closer examination of the conditions and struggles in which that consciousness of the oppressed began to take shape would merit somewhat more attention than they receive in the book. Without it, to take two proximate examples, both of them outside the book’s time span, it is very difficult to assess the significance of such events as the recent bombing campaign by a group proclaiming its allegiance to the poor and exploited, or the response to and assassination of J.M. Kariuki—both of them suggesting, at the least, an assessment of the potential basis for ‘left populism’ in Kenyan politics.

The difficulty seems, in the end, to involve what Colin Leys himself identifies and discusses in the opening chapter: the shortcomings of ‘underdevelopment’ theory, in its versions both national-bourgeois and ‘neo-Marxist’ (the latter a formulation itself pregnant with petty-bourgeois ideology). The dominant themes of underdevelopment literature have been in fact static and economic, despite a commitment to historical and non-disciplinary analysis. In the event, what tended to emerge was a gloomy acceptance of the pervasiveness and staying-power of capitalism, and/or somewhat apocalyptic prescriptions of socialist revolution as the ‘only alternative’ to deepening exploitation and underdevelopment, without much idea of how social formations might progress from one to the other. Leys rightly locates this problem in the ‘heavily economistic character of most underdevelopment theory’:

Social classes play an important part in it, yet rather abstractly and passively, not as protagonists in intensifying struggles providing its central dynamic. Political power, control of the state, is also seen to be important, but again somewhat abstractly, not as a pervasive dimension of the struggles between classes and of the structures of oppression which permit one class to exploit another, and which indeed are bound up with the very formation and development of classes. Imperialism features in underdevelopment theory, too, of course, but once more in a rather disembodied form... (p 20).

And he notes that underdevelopment theory ‘concentrates on what happens to the underdeveloped countries at the hands of imperialism and colonialism, rather than on the total historical process involved, including the various forms of struggle against imperialism and colonialism which grow out of the conditions of underdevelopment’. (p 20). Leys’s own study has certainly taken us very much further, to a much deeper understanding of the mechanisms of imperialist domination within Kenya in the post-colonial age, and by extension within the many other peripheral capitalist countries which
substantially share Kenya's characteristics. But his analysis has superceded those he correctly criticises without quite transcending them: the emphasis remains predominantly on what the dominant classes have done to the Kenyan masses, so that the political character and capacities of the various exploited classes and strata are present in the analysis mainly by inference. To make such a criticism, of course, is in fact to pay a very substantial tribute to Leys's work: for it is to say that the very richness and power of his own research could and ultimately should have led him to an even more important achievement. The book attacks and answers so many of the leading questions that its failure to deal adequately with the major contradiction of Kenyan neo-colonialism stands out more sharply than is perhaps fair for any author. To resolve that contradiction is ultimately, of course, a matter for the political action of the Kenyan masses: in its theoretical aspects, however (in the elaboration of which even 'academic' work is highly relevant) the limitations of ideologies of underdevelopment become apparent, even—perhaps particularly—in the hands of such able and critical adherents as Colin Leys.

Geoff Lamb

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This is the third collection of the writings and speeches of Tanzania's President Julius Nyerere. Undoubtedly Nyerere would like to go down in history as having made some substantial contribution not only to political practice but also to political thinking. He no doubt wishes people to take his statements seriously, and perhaps even to study them diligently, thus the periodic compilation of them in volume form. This volume is very varied in form and quality. It consists of 46 different texts ranging from serious discussions to mere *ex tempore* statements, an entire third of them speeches given at state banquets and lunches.

Here, as in his previous two collections, (*Freedom and Unity* and *Freedom and Socialism*), Nyerere harps on familiar themes: development, progress, freedom, justice, equality and so on. Used vaguely and loosely these notions have by and large become empty clichés—mere catchwords used by heads of states in underdeveloped countries to lull the masses. During the independence struggle these slogans were very instrumental in mobilising the people; now they have lost all content. In the seventies a few additional concepts are bandied about: capitalism, exploitation, socialism and indeed revolution. These words, once anathema, have entered the everyday vocabulary of Africa's heads of states, invariably emptied of meaningful content. True, Nyerere cannot be ranked with the more blatant dictators—particularly those of the military type. Africa today is a playground for imperialism and those who masquerade under the eminent titles of President, Prime Minister and Leader are the scum of the lumpen-bourgeoisie. Bereft of ideas that can compel some creativity in their countries so as to raise the level of the productive forces and solve at least the most insidious social problems of their peoples, these 'leaders' are at their best only in assisting international