

Bonapartism and Kenyatta's Regime in Kenya

In his otherwise excellent review of Colin Leys' book, *Underdevelopment in Kenya*, in *R.A.P.E.* 3, Geoff Lamb omits examination of what I regard to be the most questionable element of Leys' analysis, the Bonapartist character of the Kenyan state. Lamb points out the one-sidedness of Leys' analysis of the classes in Kenya. Leys gives a detailed and insightful analysis of the development of the dominant foreign and local bourgeois classes in Kenyan peripheral capitalism, but in the end he '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' (Lamb, p.87). But Lamb fails to follow this up with a critique of the analysis of the class nature of the state which Leys has erected on this inadequate foundation.

What is of greatest importance in this book is Leys' effort to push his analysis beyond the limitations of the 'heavily economistic character' of much of underdevelopment theory to an understanding of the mechanisms of neo-colonial domination and processes of class formation within Kenya.

Leys argues that modern Kenyan politics are similar in certain important respects to mid-nineteenth century French politics as analysed by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. According to Leys, Marx found that the basic contradiction of Bonaparte's rule was that,

the government, the state apparatus, was independent of any single class, yet in practice it could not do without class support, and could not prevent its policies fostering the interests of certain classes, even if it wished to. Yet this enhanced the political power of these classes, and so undermined its own independence of action; therefore it also worked constantly to counteract the political power of the classes whose economic power it was simultaneously building up (p.207).

Bonaparte came to power through breaking the political power of the French 'middle class', yet his economic power increased its strength and thereby renewed its political power. In the case of Kenya, it was the British bourgeoisie whose power was 'broken' by independence and the rise of Kenyatta's government. Yet, as Leys has clearly shown, Kenyatta's policies have constantly fostered the economic interests of foreign capital in Kenya and enhanced its ability to exert political influence there, thereby undermining the independence of his regime.

In his efforts to remain in power without relying too closely on any particular class or group of classes, Kenyatta has, says Leys, followed Bonaparte's example in expanding the bureaucracy to provide an independent power base for the regime. Leys quotes Marx:

an enormous bureaucracy, well-gallooned and well-fed, is the *idée napoléenne* which is most congenial of all to the second Bonaparte. How could it be otherwise, seeing that alongside the actual classes of society he is forced to create an artificial caste, for which the maintenance of his regime becomes a bread-and-butter question? (p.209).

Leys counterposes this analysis of the 'Bonapartist' neo-colonial state with Fanon's analysis of the 'bourgeoisie of the civil service'. He criticises Fanon for oversimplification in portraying the neo-colonial state as merely the means by which national puppets serve foreign interests in their country in order to enrich themselves. In contrast, Leys starts out

from the essential fact that in this situation the leader is not the agent of any one class, but enjoys a measure of independence. Marx sees this independence as in the long run rather illusory, partly because the leader cannot in reality be 'the patriarchal benefactor of all classes' as he would like, and finds that he 'cannot give to one class without taking from another'; but even more because the development of the capitalist mode of production was steadily eroding the position of the pre-capitalist classes in France, so that the balancing act of bonapartism would eventually be bound to give way to the solid weight of bourgeois domination (p.211).

Hence, Louis Bonaparte's regime in France was purely transitional in character, possibly only in this unresolved middle stage of the class struggle in France and sure to disappear once the bourgeoisie had gained sufficient economic and political power to impose its will on French society. However, in conditions of underdevelopment, although a Bonapartist regime is limited by the impossibility of benefiting all classes alike, Leys maintains that the development of the capitalist mode of production does not necessarily progressively erode the position of the pre-capitalist classes. On the contrary, it usually must preserve them as a pre-condition for capital accumulation at the periphery. Thus, for Leys, the independence of a Bonapartist government in an underdeveloped country 'seems even more significant'. And, therefore,

What was for Marx a purely transitional and relatively short-term phenomenon may become, in some circumstances, a generic form of government at the capitalist periphery; and the content of bonapartist rule reflects the complexity of the contradictions involved, as well as the increasing difficulty of integrating them and of relying on class hegemony rather than force (p.211).

The argument is compelling; Leys has offered us a model of neo-colonial states which corresponds to the economic model of permanent primitive accumulation at the capitalist periphery. Moreover, it is a model which attempts to overcome the oversimplification of Fanon's analysis and come to terms with the difficult analytical problems of comprehending the complexity of class structure and dynamics in conditions of peripheral capitalism.

However, it is a flawed model, whose content contradicts some of the results of Leys' economic analysis of Kenya. In the first instance, this weakness evidently stems from a misinterpretation of Marx's account of Louis Bonaparte's rule in France. Marx makes it very clear that, when he talks of the 'independence' of Bonaparte's government, he is dealing with *appearances*. After discussing Bonaparte's efforts to build a state independent of all classes, Marx concludes:

And yet the state power is not suspended in mid-air. Bonaparte represents a class, and the most numerous class of French society at that, *the small-holding [Parzellen] peasants* (The Eighteenth Brumaire, p.123).

Thus, the contradiction facing Bonaparte's rule was that his defence of *individual private property* on behalf of the small-holding peasants actually favoured the commercial, financial and, ultimately, industrial interests of those who were able to use their (larger-scale) individual property as capital, ie. the bourgeoisie.

Leys' analysis in the early parts of his book clearly should lead to the conclusion that the actual situation in Kenya is crucially different in this respect from Bonaparte's France. Kenyatta's post-independence record demonstrates, despite all his 'African socialist' and 'rural development' rhetoric, that he distinctly does not represent the peasantry in Kenya. Leys seems to recognise this when he persuasively argues that the meagre benefits which the rural masses in Kenya have gained under Kenyatta's rule (ie. small parcels of land through the resettlement schemes) have been given them because of political expediency in the face of worker-peasant militance, and the need to secure the capitalist basis of the economy and large-scale private property through a process of individualisation of land tenure throughout the country. But when Leys comes to analyse the nature of the state, his comparison of Kenyatta's with Bonaparte's rule seems to imply, if not explicitly assert, that Kenyatta does somehow nevertheless represent the Kenyan peasantry.

Thus, it is of fundamental importance to penetrate the similarities at the level of appearances in the two cases, and comprehend the essential differences in their origins and dynamics. Louis Bonaparte rose to power in France as the patriarchal representative of the large but scattered small-holding peasantry, through smashing the political power of the financial bourgeoisie and big landowners. In this context, he could attract the support of all other social classes in France which suffered under the hegemony of financial and landed capital. In particular, he gained support from petty bourgeois elements and from industrial capital. The position of the latter in mid-nineteenth century France is especially important. French industry got a late start and was at a distinct competitive disadvantage with the older, larger and stronger British industries. It therefore required for its development a state which provided protection at home against British competition and followed aggressive economic policies abroad, in order to secure markets and sources of raw materials. But financial and landed interests dominated French capitalism and controlled the state in their own interests, which were accommodated to British industrial supremacy. French industrial capital, being too weak to intervene on its own account, therefore welcomed Bonaparte's intervention as a means of smashing the hold of the financiers and landowners on the state. With their chief rivals firmly controlled, and individualised private property secured, they were in an improved position to establish their own economic and, ultimately, political hegemony within France as the necessary basis for challenging the international supremacy of British industry.

Kenyatta's regime has played a very different role in Kenya. Kenyatta began in the terminal colonial period as a representative of a would-be bourgeoisie, a coalition of various relatively privileged petty bourgeois African elements who aspired to replace the departing British and the

Asian commercial bourgeoisie. They were deliberately encouraged in their ambitions by the British, who sought to use them as a counterweight to the growing militance of the workers and peasants, who were mounting a serious challenge to the viability of a neo-colonial solution in Kenya. Kenyatta's populist patter, and the resettlement of large numbers of landless on small parcels of the settler farms, were in this context clearly sacrifices which had to be made to appease and quieten the masses. Kenyatta thereby helped to *create* a small-holding peasantry with an interest in individual property, in his efforts to promote and defend the larger actual and desired property interests of his own class, the auxiliary bourgeoisie in formation.

In his early chapters, Leys paints a vivid picture of an African élite manipulating the state apparatus and various economic activities turned over to it by the British, in order to establish itself as the ruling, if externally dependent, class in Kenya. In recent years, this auxiliary bourgeoisie has demonstrated a high level of class consciousness and cohesion, as it has increasingly succeeded in concentrating economic and political power in its own hands. To do this, it has had to implement occasional new resettlement schemes—though increasingly grudgingly—and has had to bombard the masses with populist rhetoric, in order to secure their acquiescence if not their support. Meanwhile, it has systematically liquidated the genuine populists in its midst. It seems evident that Kenyatta's regime is the conscious agent of this class, with Kenyatta and his family among the biggest beneficiaries of its policies. This conclusion, however, seems to evaporate in Leys' later discussion of the relative 'independence' of the state. Since it tends to obscure these basic aspects of the Kenyan state, Leys' comparison of Kenyatta's Kenya and Bonaparte's France confuses our understanding, if it is not altogether mistaken.

There is, however, a contradiction in Kenyatta's situation which is similar in its form to that which faced Bonaparte. This contradiction stems from the basic fact of the neo-colonial domination of Kenya: Kenyatta's regime, by using the state to favour the interests of the economically weak African auxiliary bourgeoisie—ie. by fostering and defending private property and capitalist conditions of production—actually serves the interests and increases the economic and political strength of the multinational companies which operate in Kenya and control vast amounts of developed forms of capital. Thus, Kenyatta's regime constantly renews the power of the European (and more recently American) bourgeoisie, the very class whose power it was supposed to have smashed at independence. In short, in order to become a bourgeoisie at all, the Kenyan élite had to become an auxiliary bourgeoisie in the service of an authentic bourgeoisie which lives elsewhere. But that, of course, was the plan from the start. In Kenya's situation as regional centre for international capital in East Africa, this reduced role is still a very lucrative one.

To the extent that Marx's analysis of the state in Bonapartist France helps us to understand this contradiction facing Kenyatta's regime, the comparison of the two situations is useful. However, the class content of the two cases differs fundamentally, and must be analysed

concretely and carefully. The principal differences lie in the facts that Kenyatta does not represent a peasantry but a bourgeoisie, and that the class whose interests his policies primarily serve is ex-colonial and foreign. But above all, as Leys does point out, while mid-nineteenth-century France was in transition to full-fledged independent capitalism, modern Kenya is securely confined within the distorting structures of dependent peripheral capitalism.

So far I have concentrated on what I have suggested is a misreading of Marx's account of Bonaparte's rule in France in Leys' analysis of the neo-colonial state in Kenya. However, the problem goes much deeper than that, to the one-sidedness of Leys' class analysis, which Lamb has correctly identified. Although Leys has given a detailed and compelling account of the rise of the African auxiliary and petty bourgeois classes, in the end, workers and peasants do not appear as economic and political actors in the process. As Lamb notes, Leys fails to transcend the economistic bias of the work he criticises, but rather reproduces it on another level by confining himself to a description of the general economic conditions of the oppressed masses. The working class is seen as small, disorganised and subject to the manipulation of corrupt trade union leadership, without reference to the seriousness of previous struggles or the prospects for future ones. All small-scale agricultural production is seen as occurring within what Leys regards generically as 'peasant modes of production', without distinguishing among them or concretely analysing their specific structures and dynamics, or the earlier involvement of their actors in the Land Freedom Army, etc. Ultimately, Leys' analysis of the oppressed classes stops where it should begin, with the bland statement that 'the class character of the masses. . . is inevitably complex and ambiguous compared with the rapid and largely unambiguous crystallisation of an African auxiliary bourgeoisie, and of various petty bourgeois strata' (p.172). The result is a feeling that Leys regards the defeat suffered by the masses in the transition to neo-colonialism as permanent. The reader is thus left unprepared to interpret the recent expressions of popular discontent, the bombings, the Kariuki incident or the significance of the recently announced formation of a revolutionary socialist party by Kenyans.

In drawing his parallel between Kenyatta's rule in Kenya and Bonaparte's rule in France, Leys seems to mistake the monetary acquiescence by Kenyan workers and peasants, in the neo-colonial step-up imposed after their earlier rebellion was crushed, for acceptance of, if not active support for, Kenyatta's regime. Having thus apparently established the passivity of the Kenyan masses and the insignificance of internal class struggles, Leys then focuses on conflicts between national and foreign bourgeoisies as the dominant contradiction in the neo-colonial situation. The result is a singularly gloomy outlook which overvalues the power and independence of the auxiliary bourgeoisie and portrays neo-colonialism not as the 'last stage of imperialism', but as merely another phase in the development of a vigorous and resurgent imperialism. While it may be true that imperialism is a lot more adaptable and less immediately moribund than the somewhat apocalyptic leftist accounts criticised by Leys give it credit for, in the final analysis, Leys fails to give us anything

but a different, more pessimistic, *opinion*. Both opinions fail to achieve validation through the kind of documentation which can only come from a detailed concrete examination of the economic, political and ideological conditions of the masses and their class struggles.

By now it should be clear that the results of such a concrete analysis are very unlikely to support the Bonapartist thesis for the case of Kenya. However, the question of the general relevance of the Bonapartist model to the study of neo-colonial states remains. Its most likely relevance would seem to be to the more genuinely populist regimes in Africa. In investigating such cases, the transitional character of Bonaparte's regime must be kept in mind; does contemporary Bonapartism correspond to a transitional phase in the development of peripheral capitalism, in the way Louis Bonaparte's regime corresponded to a phase in the development of French central capitalism, or can it achieve the kind of semi-permanence in conditions of underdevelopment which Leys suggests? It seems to me most likely that Bonapartist regimes, to the extent that they are possible in the modern Third World, will reveal themselves to be as unstable and short-lived as the original. For, the decisive contradiction facing such a regime—as a form of state power—is between small-scale property on the one hand and, on the other, larger-scale, *capitalised* property, both national and foreign. The long future predicted by Leys for the Bonapartist state at the periphery is the product of his failure to grasp this point and his consequent focus on the conflicts between national and foreign capital, Leys' analysis of this point merely demonstrates the necessity and relative permanence of the *neo-colonial state* as a generic form of government at the capitalist periphery. The prospects of a specifically Bonapartist neo-colonial state are an altogether different and more problematic question.

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