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CLASS ANALYSIS AND POLITICS IN AFRICA:
SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE ROLE OF THE BOURGEOISIE
IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS IN WEST AFRICA

by

Guy Martin

Introduction

This paper purports to belong to the Marxist tradition of political economy in the study of development problems in the Third World initiated by Paul Baran and maintained by such contemporary scholars as Andre Gunder Frank for Latin America, and Samir Amin for Africa.¹ It is based on the premise that a correct understanding of the political forces and processes of contemporary Africa requires a Marxist class analysis. Such an analysis appears necessary if one is to understand who the oppressors and the oppressed are, so that a correct strategy designed to improve the situation of the latter can be outlined. More specifically,

*Marxist analysis requires examination and analysis of the material conditions which determine the possibilities for and obstacles to revolutionary action by the exploited classes. It demands a political analysis, in terms of class struggle, of the steps necessary to fashion the conditions under which a class, in alliance with other classes, can transform its own situation and end its exploitation.*²

It should be made clear at this point that if the focus of the analysis is the bourgeoisie, it is less by ideological predilection than as a result of practical necessity. In other words, to the extent that the bourgeoisie actually wields power in Africa today, it is on this class that the analysis should center in order to locate its strengths and weaknesses. It will be obvious in the course of the analysis that my main concern is with the plight of "The Wretched of the Earth," the peasant masses of West Africa. I wish thereby to dissociate this perspective from that of the "new left" or "neo-Marxist" ideology "à la Amin" which, under the cover of

a Marxist phraseology, objectively caters to the interests of a fraction of the new African national bourgeoisie: witness the concentration on the bourgeoisie-qua-bourgeoisie and the absence of class struggle dimension in such analyses.³

To the extent that "the analysis of class relations in Africa remains underdeveloped,"⁴ it is necessary to proceed first to some methodological observations relating to the significance and meaning of class analysis. This should set the framework for a tentative refinement of the concept of "bourgeoisie" as applied to the African context. Finally, the role of the most significant sections of the West African bourgeoisie (bureaucratic bourgeoisie and intellectuals/intelligentsia) in the political process will be briefly assessed.

I. THE SIGNIFICANCE AND MEANING OF CLASS ANALYSIS IN AFRICA: SOME METHODOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

I. 1. *The Concept of Social Class*

According to the Marxist theory, the essence of the concept of social class can be summed up as follows:

- (a) class analysis originates in and is linked with the analysis of the mode of production;
- (b) the concept of classes appears as the result of the analysis of the productive forces (technological level of the means of production and organization of labor power) and of the relations of production (relations that men set up among themselves in the process of social production);
- (c) the concept of classes requires an essentially dialectical analysis, i.e. social classes should be viewed as the expression of antagonistic relations of the components of the modes of production. Hence the significance of the study of class struggle in any class analysis.⁵

Based on these premises, a class is defined primarily by the relations or modes of relations conditioning the possibilities of interaction among men, given a determinate mode of production. Hence the following definition, which is adopted for the purpose of this analysis:

*By social classes we shall mean basic groupings of individuals in a society, opposed to one another by virtue of the role they play in the productive process, from the point of view of the relations they establish among themselves in the organization of labor and in respect of property.*⁶

To the extent that the concept of "Mode of Production" is an ideal type in the Weberian sense of the term, one should realize that no system of production in history exists in a pure state. In effect, any real society consists of more than one mode of production. There are co-existing and overlapping modes, though one is dominant. Furthermore, given social formations (mode of production plus political and cultural mode) associated with specific modes of production are historically determined. This means that it is essential to consider social classes in a specific society or social formation at a distinct juncture in time.

In the light of this analysis, it becomes quite clear that the conventional wisdom prevailing in African governmental and academic circles to the effect that African societies are classless just does not hold any longer. The main question then relates not to the absence or existence of classes, but to the nature and number of existing classes. An attempt to answer this question in the African context requires an analysis of the nature of African pre-capitalist modes of production and of the impact of capitalism, introduced by European imperialist expansion and colonial domination, on these pre-capitalist modes of production. In this respect, the concepts of colonial and neo-colonial modes of production that have been put forward by some authors need to be further refined and empirically tested.⁷ Within the confines of this short paper, I can do no more than point to the significance of this problem.

Lastly, such an approach implies that the concept of social class is a valid instrument of analysis provided that the social evolution of dependent countries is considered as part of the broader social system constituted by the economic and political sphere of influence of the dominant foreign power(s).

Such is, succinctly stated, the broad analytical framework within which the nature and significance of the African bourgeoisie will be examined.

II. NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AFRICAN BOURGEOISIE

II. 1. Nature

In the African countries, the process towards the development of "national" capitalism was arrested when these countries came into contact with advanced capitalism. Hence the "underdeveloped" nature of the contemporary African bourgeoisie.

An attempt has been made by some scholars to maintain a distinction between a "national" and a "comprador" bourgeoisie, a national bourgeoisie being that faction of the bourgeoisie whose interests are linked with the nation's economic development, and which thus comes into contradiction with the interests of big foreign capital; and the comprador bourgeoisie being that faction of the capitalist class whose interests are linked to foreign imperialist capital. It seems to me that in a period marked by increasing interpenetration and internationalization of capital, the distinction becomes largely irrelevant. Thus, Fanon's early characterization of the role of the African bourgeoisie retains its validity:

The national middle class discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary.

Seen through its eyes, its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neo-colonialism.⁸

Fanon's insight in this respect was to show that the nature and role of the African bourgeoisie could only be analyzed within the wider framework of the international capitalist system, and that the African bourgeoisie is essentially an appendage of the Western capitalist bourgeoisie, "the Western bourgeoisie's business agents." For the perpetuation of underdevelopment -- the distinctive form of capitalism experienced by countries subjected to domination by foreign capital -- requires the presence of domestic classes whose interests converge with those of foreign capital and will enforce their political dominance.

However, this description still leaves us with the problem of analyzing in greater detail the various components of the African bourgeoisie, to see if and to what extent their outlook and interests might be divergent in the contemporary situation.

II. 2 Class fractions, class strata and social categories

In various writings, Poulantzas has developed the thesis that purely economic criteria are not sufficient to determine and locate social classes. He makes much of the fact that political and ideological criteria should also be taken into consideration when defining social classes. He sees such a distinction as being most applicable to the Marxist distinction between fractions of a class, strata within classes and social

categories.¹⁰ It should be made clear here that such distinctions are *internal* to the class structure. They refer to position within the ideological and political relations of the social division of labor.

"Strata" usually refers to wage differentials within a class, such as for instance the "labor aristocracy" within the working class.

"Fractions" are distinct from simple strata since they coincide with important economic differentiations. This is exemplified by the distinction between "traditional" petty bourgeoisie and "modern" petty bourgeoisie. The first, which tends to decline in size, includes the small-scale producers and small traders (artisanal and family businesses). These are the "petty commodity producers" described in a recent article on Senegal.¹¹ The "modern" petty bourgeoisie, on the other hand, consists of the non-productive¹² wage-earning workers: wage-earners employed in the "service" sector of the economy (commerce, banking, insurance, transport, etc.), technicians, engineers, intellectuals, and state-employed civil servants.

Social categories are characterized by the fact that "while political and ideological criteria can intervene in a more or less important fashion in determining fractions and strata, in the determination of social categories they have the *dominant role*."¹³ More specifically, the term "social category" designates a group of agents whose main role is its function in the state apparatus and in ideology, such as, for instance, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia.

The term "bureaucratic bourgeoisie" refers to a situation in which there exist, as in Tanzania, a weak petty-bourgeoisie whose ruling sections "own" the state apparatus through which they wield economic power. In this regard, Shivji's distinction between "economic bureaucracy" and "administrative bureaucracy" within the broader category of "bureaucratic bourgeoisie" becomes quite relevant:

On top of the administrative bureaucracy of the civil service-type running the state machinery, there arises the economic bureaucracy. The economic bureaucracy is involved directly in the managing and running of the production process. The administrative bureaucracy, on the other hand, is not that directly related to the production process -- it is essentially part of the political superstructure.¹⁴

Consequently, the control of the state apparatus in the interest of the international bourgeoisie is the distinguishing feature of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie.

The term "intelligentsia" refers to

. . . a counter-elite dedicated to radical change. Although they belong by origin to the modernized minority of the society, they identify with the oppressed majority. And despite the fact that it is only a minority of a minority in terms of numbers, the intelligentsia has . . . a potentially very large revolutionary constituency among the masses of the population. ¹⁵

In the African context, the term "intelligentsia" refers to that section of the "intellectual petty bourgeoisie" that identifies with the workers and peasants. In Cabral's celebrated formulation,

. . . the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie is honest; i.e. in spite of all the hostile conditions, it remains identified with the fundamental interests of the popular masses. To do this it may have to commit suicide, but it will not lose; by sacrificing itself it can reincarnate itself, but in the condition of workers or peasants. ¹⁶

These two social categories, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie and the intellectuals/intelligentsia are the two most politically significant groups in West Africa today. Consequently, their importance and function in the political process of this area will be briefly assessed in the final section of this paper.

II. THE ROLE OF THE BUREAUCRATIC BOURGEOISIE AND OF THE INTELLECTUALS/INTELLIGENTSIA IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS IN WEST AFRICA.

II. 1. The Bureaucratic Bourgeoisie

The imposition of colonial rule in West Africa by the metropolitan bourgeoisie was institutionalized by the creation of a state apparatus through which this class could exercise dominion over all the indigenous social classes in the colony. Due to its inherently coercive nature, the colonial state was equipped with a powerful bureaucratic-military apparatus and mechanisms of government which enabled it, through its routine

operations, to subordinate the native social classes. At the time of independence, the post-colonial society inherited this overdeveloped state apparatus. As a consequence of the continued dependency of the country on the former metropolitan bourgeoisie on the one hand, and of the relative weakness of the indigenous bourgeoisie on the other, there appears what Hamza Alavi has called the "relative autonomy" of the post-colonial state. Alavi describes this process thusly:

. . .the state in the post -colonial society is not the instrument of a single class. It is relatively autonomous and it mediates between the competing interests of the three propertied classes, namely the metropolitan bourgeoisie, the indigenous bourgeoisie and the landed classes, while at the same time acting on behalf of them all to preserve the social order in which their interests are embedded, namely the institution of private property and the capitalist mode as the dominant mode of production. 17

At the apex of the post-colonial state, the "economic bureaucracy" (in Shivji's terms) which takes over control at independence, is thus able to maintain and even extend its dominant power in society, being freed from direct metropolitan control. It can do so because of the strategic position which the state occupies vis-a-vis the economy, including the privileged access to economic surplus.

The bureaucratic bourgeoisie does not possess an infrastructure of economic power before it wins political power. Hence it transforms the state not only into an instrument of political domination, but also into a source of economic power. This process is most evident in the case of countries such as Guinea, Ghana (until 1966) and Mali (until 1968) which, under the convenient label of "Socialism" did precisely that while proclaiming to act "in the interest of the people." Equating nationalization of the economy and "etatisation" of the political structure, with socialism, they in effect pursued policies consistent with their own class interests. 18

In Senegal, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie had much to gain from the establishment of a new framework of political control in the rural areas at independence. The administrative device of the marketing cooperatives, with a resultant state monopoly of the marketing of agricultural produce, were well adapted both to secure political control and to extract a high

proportion of total revenues from the peasantry. This was done in cooperation with local religious notables who were in a position to command a sizeable and devoted (not to say submissive) following in the major peanut-producing areas of the country. ¹⁹

In the Ivory Coast, the situation is one of extreme polarization between "haves" and "have not," exploiters and exploited, bourgeoisie and proletariat, due to the relatively advanced stage of development of plantation and mercantile capitalism. In addition, the fact that a large number of bureaucrats and politicians are also landowners or absentee planters (much like in Kenya) further complicates the social picture in that country. ²⁰

In Nigeria, the political activities of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie have likewise been oriented towards gaining access to state power, and the offices and revenues at its disposal, thereby creating opportunities for themselves within the framework of a neo-colonial economic, fiscal and administrative system at the expense of other classes. Gavin Williams' description of the situation there, though conceptually questionable, remains a fairly accurate one:

*. . . the bourgeoisie's elite status has facilitated their access to political resources, which have been used for the furtherance of their own class interests. These class interests have been compatible with the maintenance of a neo-colonial economic order.*²¹

III. 2. The Intellectuals/Intelligentsia

The potential political significance of this social category far outweighs its numerical importance. This is due to the fact that benefiting from an average to high level of education, it finds itself in a position of monopoly with respect to knowledge and know-how. Some authors have attempted to refer to such a group as an "elite," according to criteria of education and income. However, as these authors themselves admit, such a classification is conceptually and operationally quite problematic in the long run when applied to the African context:

*. . . while the term elite may be appropriate in describing the western-educated and wealthy men of some contemporary African societies, its relevance may be short lived.*²²

The intellectuals soon find themselves in an awkward position. They are faced with the following dilemma: either join the bureaucratic bourgeoisie and become part of the exploitative process of the international capitalist system; or, in Cabral's formula, "commit suicide" and join the ranks of the exploited and oppressed masses, the workers and peasants of Africa, thereby taking on the characteristics of an "intelligentsia" as defined above.

Experience has shown that they are more likely to follow the first course of action than the second one, either by choice or under various forms of constraint ranging from "enticement" to open coercion. If the most politically conscious and vocal elements among the intellectuals cannot be forcefully silenced (by imprisonment or otherwise), they are, as is presently the case in the Ivory Coast, "bought off" by being offered all of the amenities enjoyed by the local bureaucratic bourgeoisie, one of the wealthiest in West Africa: generous salaries and "fringe benefits," luxurious houses, expensive limousines etc. Many a sincere and dedicated, "revolutionary-inclined" intellectual has seen his ideological convictions fritter away at the mere sight of hard foreign currency and Swiss bank accounts.

Yet, in the long run, given the structure of contemporary African societies, the responsibility for revolutionary change rests with this group alone, for "this is the only stratum capable of controlling or even utilizing the instruments which the colonial state used against our people."²³

Consequently, the historic mission of the intelligentsia is, through political education, to progressively raise the class consciousness of the oppressed masses by explaining to them, in simple terms, the nature and extent of their exploitation, both in the national and international contexts. As Fanon has justly observed, the masses can be fooled only for so long, and "everything can be explained to the people, on the single condition that you really want them to understand."²⁴

Such a strategy should be developed within the framework of a truly revolutionary and popular political party, dedicated to the pursuit of a socialist path of development. Such a course could have been initiated under the "socialist" regimes of Modibo Keita, Kwame Nkrumah and Sekou Toure, the prerequisite being

. . . a political party which made the situation and demands of the most oppressed classes (urban and rural proletariat, sharecroppers, indebted tenant farmers) the

absolute "moral imperative" of its organization and action. This class-based party, acting for and through the oppressed but potentially revolutionary strata of society, could alone have provided the conscious support for a socialist path of development.²⁵

That such a party was never developed accounts to a large extent for the eventual failure of socialism in these countries.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, adopting a Marxist perspective, I have attempted to show the significance of class analysis for a correct appraisal of the political process in Africa today, as well as the methodological problem involved in undertaking such analysis. I have suggested that two social categories within the bourgeoisie, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie and the intellectuals/intelligentsia, hold a strategic position in the political process of the West African states. I have tentatively concluded that while the former group, through its monopoly of political and economic power, partakes in the exploitation of the oppressed masses of West Africa, it is incumbent upon the latter to create the conditions favorable to a revolutionary action designed to end such exploitation.

Footnotes

1. Paul Baran, *The Political Economy of Growth*. New York; Monthly Review Press, 1957; Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*. New York: MRP, 1967; Samir Amin, *Accumulation on a World Scale*. New York: MRP, 1974 (2 vols.) and *Neo-Colonialism in West Africa*. New York: MRP, 1974. However, as will become apparent soon, I certainly do not accept all of Amin's premises and formulations.
2. "Classes in Africa" (Editorial), *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 3 (May-October 1975), p. 2.
3. For a devastating and brilliant critique of Samir Amin's work from a Marxist perspective, see: Jean-Pierre Olivier, "Afrique: Qui Exploite Qui?". *Les Temps Modernes*, no.346 (May 1975), pp. 1506-1551.
4. "Classes in Africa", *R.A.P.E.*, p. 1.
5. This analysis owes a good deal to the excellent presentation of the concept of social class contained in Theotonio Dos Santos, "The Concept of Social Classes". *Science and Society*, XXXIV, 2 (Summer 1970), pp. 166-93. For the original Marxist formulation of the concept, the reader is referred to Marx's *Capital*, especially chapter 6 of volume 1 on Wage Labor and Capital and the final chapter of volume 3; see also some of Marx's political writings such as "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" and "Class Struggles in France".
6. T. Dos Santos, "The Concept of Social Classes", p. 188.
7. The concept of "colonial mode of production" has been first developed by Pierre-Philippe Rey, *Colonialisme, Neo-colonialisme et Transition au Capitalisme*. Paris: Maspero, 1971, pp. 342-435; that of "neo-colonial mode of production" has been advanced by Issa G. Shivji, *The Silent Class Struggle*. Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1973, pp. 4-18.
8. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1968, p. 152.
9. F. Fanon, pp. 152-3.
10. Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*. London: New Left Books, 1973 and "On Social Classes". *New Left Review*, no. 78 (March-April 1973), pp. 27-54.

11. Olivier Le Brun and Chris Gerry, "Petty Producers and Capitalism". *R. A. P. E.*, 3 (May-October 1975), pp. 20-32.
12. In the sense that they do not *directly* take part in the process of production and the production of surplus-value but do so indirectly. These workers sell their labor-power and their wage is determined by the price of reproducing their labor-power.
13. N. Poulantzas, "On Social Classes", p. 40 (N.P.'s emphasis)
14. Issa Shivji, *The Silent Class Struggle*, p. 13 (I. S.'s emphasis)
15. Robert C. Tucker, *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1969, pp. 120-21
16. Amilcar Cabral, *Revolution in Guinea*. New York: MRP, 1972, p. 72.
17. Hamza Alavi, "The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh". *New Left Review*, 74 (July-August 1972) p. 62.
18. For a description of this process in Ghana, see: Bob Fitch & Mary Oppenheimer, *Ghana: End of an Illusion*. New York: MRP, 1966 and Roger Murray, "Second Thoughts on Ghana". *NLR*, 42 (March-April 1967), 25-39; For Guinea, see B. Ameillon, *La Guinee: Bilan d'une independance*. Paris: Maspero, 1964; for Mali, see Claude Meillassoux, "A Class Analysis of the Bureaucratic Process in Mali". *Journal of Development Studies*, VI, 2 (January 1970), pp. 99-105 and Guy Martin, "Socialism, Economic Development and Planning in Mali, 1960-1968". Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Canadian Association of African Studies, Toronto, February 19-22, 1975 (to appear shortly in the *Canadian Journal of African Studies* in a revised version). The best study along similar lines for Tanzania is, in my opinion, that of Issa G. Shivji, *The Silent Class Struggle and "Tanzania" The Class Struggle Continues* (mimeo, Dept. of Development Studies, University of Dar es Salaam, 1973). For an altogether not quite successful attempt to apply Alavi's model to the case of Tanzania, see John S. Saul, "The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Tanzania". *The Socialist Register 1974*, pp. 349-72. This process will be dealt at length in my dissertation tentatively entitled "The Post-Colonial State, the Bureaucratic Bourgeoisie and Economic Development in Mali, 1960-1972" (Indiana University, Dept. of Political Science, 1976).

19. Donal B. Cruise O'Brien, *The Mourides of Senegal*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971; D. B. Cruise O'Brien, "Co-operators and Bureaucrats: Class Formation in a Senegalese Peasant Society". *Africa*, XLI, 4 (October 1971), pp. 263-77 and *Saints and Politicians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.
20. Samir Amin, *Le Developpement du Capitalisme en Cote-d'Ivoire*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967; Bonnie Campbell, "Social Change and Class Formation in a French West African State". *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, VIII, 2 (1974), pp. 285-306.
21. Gavin Williams, "The social stratification of a neo-colonial economy: Western Nigeria"; in Chris Allen & R. W. Johnson (eds.), *African Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 243 (G. W.'s emphasis)
22. P. C. Lloyd (ed), *The New Elites of Tropical Africa*. London: Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 62.
23. A. Cabral, *Revolution in Guinea*, p. 69.
24. Fanon, p. 189.
25. Roger Murray, "Second Thoughts on Ghana", p. 38.

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