

BOOK REVIEWS

Richard Sandbrook, Proletarians and African Capitalism: The Kenyan Case, 1960-1972. New York: Cambridge, 1975. 222 pp. plus appendices and index. \$23.50

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Since the publication of Walter Rodney's How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (1972), Marxist or Marxist-oriented analyses of East African political economies are beginning to register in the East African academic scene. For example, the global picture of underdevelopment and class formation drawn by Rodney has now been narrowed down considerably in the case of Kenya by E.A. Brett, Colonialism and Underdevelopment in East Africa (1974); Wolff, Economics of Colonialism: Britain and Kenya, 1870-1930 (1974); Van Zwaneberg, Colonial Capitalism and Labour in Kenya, 1919-1939 (1975), and Colin Leys, Underdevelopment in Kenya: The Political Economy of Neo-Colonialism, 1964-1971 (1974). Although, as we suggest below, Sandbrook is not as rigorously Marxist as some of these publications, this reviewer regards his book as a welcome addition to this small but steadily growing literature.

1. The Problem.

The problem which the book seeks to investigate is fairly straightforward. It is the validity of Franz Fanon's assertion that the unionised worker in Africa is not "the exploited, deprived class depicted in studies of the primitive stage of western capitalism, but the most comfortably off fraction of the people." (p. 3) As such, the worker is a convert to capitalism who cannot be expected to challenge the fundamental tenets of the system in which he operates. He will take militant action against the state elites only to "wrest more of the fruits of neo-colonialism from the national bourgeoisie." This is the thesis which Sandbrook seeks to advance, using the unionised worker in Kenya as his case study.

Sandbrook explains his choice of Kenya on the ground that the country is "the archetype of dependent capitalism in Africa," to which Fanon's thesis is directed. Although one might have thought that the Ivory Coast better fits this characterisation, there is no doubt that Sandbrook's choice is well-merited. Indeed Colin Leys has gone further and classified Kenya as a neo-colonial state. In characterising African states as "capitalist," or "dependent," or both, the issue is one of degree. Issues of appropriate typology only arise when we proceed further and denominate social groups in African countries as classes, as Sandbrook and Leys do. Although Sandbrook has

misgivings about the use of traditional Marxist categories (p. 10 ff.), it is clear from his presentation that he considers that at least an "incipient" class structure is identifiable in Kenyan society (p. 13 ff.). In defiance of the literature, this reviewer takes the position that such categories are by no means self-evident. Although the political class (or better still, the state elite) is now well defined in most African countries, the lower-level strata have not become clearly identified even in Kenya. This does not, however, detract substantially from Sandbrook's analysis, which does not really depend on such typologies. In seeking to locate unionised workers within this "incipient class structure" Sandbrook concludes that they have neither attained "the political consciousness whereby they recognise the irreconcilable antagonism of their interests to the whole of modern political and social system" (p. 18), nor can they be classified as part of a "labour aristocracy." Much of the book, therefore, can be read simply as a contextual analysis of trade union politics in Kenya, and one that is better explained (correctly in this reviewer's opinion) in terms of "patron-clientship" rather than class action.

2. The Hypothesis.

Sandbrook's primary hypothesis, then, is this: that as long as union leaders "remain dependent upon those below for financial and personal support ... [they will] cling tenaciously to traditional union goals (e.g. high wage demands, grievance handling)" (p. 25) despite exhortations from government to espouse "productionist" rather than "consumptionist" policies. The problem with this hypothesis is that it begs too many important questions. For example, are full-time union leaders dependent on the workers simply because they draw their salaries from the latter's subscriptions? Is the position of the leader not paid by the union any different? And in identifying high wages and grievance handling as "traditional union goals" are we not assuming too readily that "capitalism" manifests itself in Africa in much the same way as it does in the industrial West?

Indeed the hypothesis may be challenged on another ground, that even if the dependency relationship (however defined) is reduced by making union funds more secure, as was done in Kenya with the introduction of the compulsory check-off system in 1965, "militant economism" may still continue, as Sandbrook himself has found. But the answer he gives to this apparent contradiction is unsatisfactory. The persistence of militancy despite governmental aversion to such activities is not merely a function of factional conflicts that are fanned by ethnic or class cleavages. One has to take into account two other variables which are not fully examined by Sandbrook. The first is the inherent weakness of unions as bargaining units in African countries generally. This is particularly evident in Kenya where unions have been progressively disabled from using some of their most crucial bargaining weapons (e.g.,

the right to withdraw labor) in a situation of increasing un-employment. The effect obviously is to increase the bargaining power of management since, in theory, it has unrestricted access to labour, and can therefore hire and fire virtually at will. The fact that the closed-shop* is prohibited in Kenya merely emphasises the point. In practice employers have not hesitated to bring recalcitrant union leaders to the bargaining table by firing workers en masse, particularly in situations when the strike or threatened strike is declared illegal.

Management power has been prevented from becoming a menace to the stability of the work force through informal intervention by the Ministry of Labour, and the compulsory arbitration procedures that must be followed once the machinery of negotiation between union and management has been exhausted. Had Sandbrook examined the bargaining process that takes place in tripartite committees after disputes have been declared but before a reference is made to the Industrial Court, a clearer picture of Kenyan unions might well have emerged. For at this stage of a labour dispute it is not uncommon for union leaders to appeal to the state representatives on the committee to get management to accept a settlement favourable to the workers, rather than rely on their own bargaining strength. The consequence is that union militancy may very well be a function more of the contradictions that are generated by the relationship between the state elite and union leaders, than of pressures on the latter from below.

The second variable is the nature of the political system in which Kenyan unions operate. Although Sandbrook has analysed the patron-clientist interaction between unions and the state elite (the "political class") extremely carefully, he fails to show with sufficient clarity that union cleavages are very largely a mirror of national level politics. Here again what needs emphasising is that there have been very few cases of inter-union conflict in Kenya, particularly in the 1965-69 period, in which what looked like ethnic or status cleavages could not be rephrased in terms of a wider conflict in the national political area. For example, Sandbrook's analysis of the fall of Denis Akumu as secretary of the Dock Workers Union is more plausible when treated in this light (p. 135) than as merely a function of inter-ethnic rivalry at the docks (p. 117). It is not even a chicken and egg problem, as Sandbrook himself realises (p. 138); it is simply that "tribalism" has always been, and remains, a powerful weapon in national politics, and that is why it appealed so readily to "the hard-headed stevedores and longshoremen".

*Sandbrook's use of the concept (pp. 76, 125) is a bit misleading. The important thing about the "shop" is that either one cannot get a job unless one first joins a union (pre-entry) or once one has got a job, one must join a union (post-entry). Sandbrook only covers the latter.

3. The Themes.

The major themes of the book, however, are treated with a great deal of clarity. The colonial background to the evolution of workers' organisation (p. 30 ff.) is perhaps a bit thin but the legacy comes through sufficiently clearly to enable the reader to grasp the principles of political sub-ordination and economic responsibility that have become the cornerstones of post-colonial union policy. Perhaps Sandbrook should have de-emphasised the question of economic growth per se in favour of the persistence of ex-metropolitan economic interests working through clients in the "political class" as the primary determinant of labour policy. This is an interpretation well documented in Leys' book, and one which is becoming increasingly acceptable.

Secondly, the argument that union organisation, even in Kenya, tends towards oligarchy is not at all surprising. But the explanation might be much simpler than that advanced by Robert Michels, or by Lipset, Trow and Coleman's Union Democracy (1956). Apart from the competitive aspect of oligarchical systems (which may be said to be universal) might it not be possible that here, too, the Kenyan unions are simply a mirror of state organization? Had Sandbrook compared his sample with the internal organization of the National Union of Tanganyika Workers (NUTA), rather than with that of the Nigerian Coal Miners Union (NCMU), the generality of Michels' thesis might well have been called into question -- unless of course, we were to treat NUTA as yet another deviant case. The point is that it is the political and economic organization of the state which shapes the organization of unions. For, after all, unions are not simply associations of "wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment" (p. 144). Historically they have always been more than that, particularly in the French-speaking African countries. In Kenya, the unions stepped in at an early stage to fill a political gap that had been left by the proscription of political parties in 1952. Indeed, until 1960 unions were effectively the only country-wide political organizations in the country. This is precisely why there were so many unexecuted threats to deregister some of them. Political participation has left a mark on the Kenya unions not unlike that of the political machinery of the government itself. Hence the "iron law of oligarchy" cannot make sense in the Kenya case except in that context.

Finally, a few random comments may be made on Sandbrook's formulation of the relationship between the state, the unions and the workers. This reviewer agrees entirely that one must see these groups not as monolithic entities but rather as an assemblage of networks competing within and among themselves. The political "arithmetic" of control can therefore be quite tedious. This is made worse by the fact that in Kenya, unlike the situation elsewhere in Africa, there is really no

active political party to link up with. But views expressed above are of relevance here too: in assessing the degree of "pliability" of primary unions (quite apart from the federation) one needs to look at both ends of the "pressure gauge" in order to understand the situation fully. The workers are always an important pressure point, but so is the state acting on behalf of powerful individuals and multinationals. For, as Leys makes clear in his book, the dependency relationship is far more personalised in Kenya than Sandbrook's analysis would suggest. When it became clear, in 1974, that certain unions could no longer control the workers, it needed a Presidential decree of questionable legality to restore the situation to some sort of tranquility. Since then even unions have assumed that strikes are completely banned! It would be a grave mistake to analyse the subsequent lack of stoppages as a function of responsible trade unionism. Therefore, when Sandbrook asks whether "the small political class in Kenya... [can continue] to enrich itself while adopting a policy of wage restraint and union restriction," his answer underestimates the power of that class. There is no evidence that the 1974 ban is likely to lead to violent or industrial political action in the future. One hopes that an updated version of this valuable book will come to grips with that situation.

4. Conclusion.

Every piece of work has its unstated assumptions and ideological biases. In Sandbrook's book these are visible in the western industrial model of union organization that dominates the analysis. Within the context we do not consider these comments as in any way a criticism of the very scholarly presentation the book gives. But one must begin to wonder whether it isn't time that more contextual frameworks of analyses are devised to explain what are really very unique situations in the colonised world. This, as far as this reviewer is concerned, is the most fundamental task of scholarship in Africa today.