

The African Road to Anarchism?

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Summer 2008

My experiences on a recent trip to The Gambia on Africa's west-central coast, brought to mind the historic leftist dream that the state will wither away once workers have overturned capitalism.

Here's an irony of history. In the last 15 years, in the industrially undeveloped world, the state *has* withered away, not because of its supersession, but due to the extension of global capitalism. Talk of state collapse on capital's periphery doesn't mean governments have completely vanished, but that many states have diminished from being the totalized agencies of control we experience in Northern tier countries.

Following my February journey to what is officially titled The Republic of The Gambia, Africa's smallest nation, the counterintuitive idea occurred to me that (relative) state collapse may well presage an anti-authoritarian twist to the future of peripheral nations.

For reasons of comparison, let's contrast the recent history of South America and sub-Saharan Africa. Most nations in these regions have long been locked in relationships of unequal exchange with the industrialized world, selling raw materials cheaply and buying back manufactured items at jacked-up rates, meanwhile running up a debt burden both on these imports and to finance mostly corrupt government programs. The one obvious way for these nations to escape dependency was to siphon money from the raw materials sector to jump-start heavy industry, protected behind tariff walls.

Although this was only successful in a few states, the imposition of structural adjustment in the 1980s demanded by the World Bank and the IMF to satisfy outstanding loans, ended its strategic use. The creditor Western banking institutions (in return for continued loans), made the nations under their direction scuttle industrialization programs in favor of renewed emphasis on raw material extraction, plus unbrick tariff walls to ease the entry of Western imports.

The social consequences were enormous. Shuttering of factories meant the massive lay off of workers as did the downsizing of the government. The dispossessed entered the ballooning urban informal sector, joined by peasants who the new emphasis on capitalist (that is, capital intensive) agriculture had made redundant.

Mike Davis in *Planet of Slums* argues that these nations, locked into runaway urbanization and impoverishment, have little hope of escaping their downward course. Those who occupy the command centers can handily hold onto wealth and power because the mass of poor are too steeped in the day-to-day battle for survival to organize coherent resistance.

By contrast, the authors of the anthology, *Another Production Is Possible: Beyond the Capitalist Canon*, edited by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, see examples of the poor fighting back. For these thinkers, the poor, realizing the new world order has no place for them, often opt to jettison capitalist economic structures or ignore their legal strictures.

The former route is represented by the creation of a solidarity economy comprised of worker owned and managed cooperatives, which now form a portion of many South American economies. These formations, in the words of *Another Production* contributors, strive to “replace the autocracy that characterizes capitalist production...with participatory democracy within production units. The goal is to expand the field of action of democracy from the political to the economic field.”

Ignoring legal strictures is typified by the Movement of Landless Workers in Brazil, active since the late 1980s. Comprised of “lumpen peasantry” — dispossessed, floating farm laborers — the group has seized unused *latifundi*, holding and farming them until the government legalizes the take-over. The movement’s most dramatic action occurred in April 1996 when 15,000 people (!) invaded and occupied farmlands in Paraná province, which they hold to this day.

If we compare South America to Africa in terms of their likelihood of leading the charge to replace global capital, it would have to be said that in South America the poor have been better able to fight off state repression with their more vigorous labor and peasant organizations. Yet Africa, as we will see, seems in some ways better predisposed to turn the collapse of the state and the depredations of the money economy in a positive direction.

First, it is often not realized that in sub-Saharan Africa, aside from in the minority of countries with a large, white settler population and valuable resources (such as diamonds or copper), there was little penetration of capitalist agricultural forms or government into the interior. In the colonial era, as Africanist Alex Thomson notes, “the imperial powers had only limited goals. There was no desire to invest resources to ensure the state could project its authority into every corner of the new colonies.”

And, after independence, settler states excepted, Goran Hyden, in *African Politics in Comparative Perspective*, states, “Elsewhere, Africans remained only marginally affected by the market. They increasingly traded in the market, but their base was still a homestead and family farm where a subsistence ethos prevailed.”

Secondly, such limited links was in the interest of the colonists, who purposely created a semi-working class. Thomson states, “Mine owners and farm managers rely on the fact that peasants [who come to work temporarily] are also producing for themselves back on their smallholdings (farmed in their absence by their families) As workers have this additional source of subsistence, wages can be kept low.”

The salient points are these. No matter how wide the impact of world capitalism, much of sub-Saharan Africa has not been effectively shaped by state or market power. Moreover, while in South America there is a struggle to develop an alternative economy, in the parts of Africa under discussion, a robust subsistence economy, unconcerned with profit and capital expansion, continues to exist.

On our trip to The Gambia to visit our daughter, Ana, a Peace Corps volunteer, we went up country to a North River Fula village. Drawing upon Ana’s knowledge — she has lived in the village for 18 months and speaks the Fula language — we were able to get a firsthand view of life in a non-monetarized, subsistence culture. We saw that while there were people who left the village to seek work in the capital, many chose to stay home, existing at a subsistence level but with ample amounts of time for religious and cultural practices, including socializing while drinking *grinty* (green tea) and eating peanuts.

Life is simple. The Fula raise cattle, and grow millet and peanuts. Meals are either millet (breakfast and dinner) or rice (lunch), spiced up with “wicked” sauce. Fresh milk accompanies all repasts. That’s it for variety. Food is taken by hand, without utensils. A triply brewed *grinty*, made in child-size teapots and drunk from shot glasses, is the beverage for leisure time. Water for washing clothes and bathing is drawn from a well and carried home in a bucket. Houses are made from dried red clay, dug from a nearby pit and shaped and set in a wooden mold. Home furnishings are spartan, consisting solely of a bed.

In capitalist society, money earned may be spent on friends and family, but a large part is customarily invested in the earner’s own future. In the subsistence economy, by contrast, an individual who has acquired wealth feeds it back into the whole community, not only as a form of conspicuous consumption, but in recognition that all good fortune arises, not via personal initiative (primarily), but through one’s participation in a collectivity. Hyden underlines this point by citing an anthropologist, who “shows how [African] individuals who have recently acquired their wealth spend lavishly on such private ceremonies as funerals and weddings to demonstrate their commitment to local institutions of kinship.”

Such focus on the ceremonies of gift-giving was evident in our village. As a present to our hosts, we brought a 50 kilo bag of rice. The day after we arrived, a special ritual took place to give thanks to Allah and divide the grain between the seven compounds that made up the unit. The local Muslim preacher first led the group in prayer, each of us holding out our arms, palms upward, in a receiving gesture. Then the rice was evenly distributed between seven large pots. After the division of the food, a second prayer was offered.

In such a world where the giving and taking of gifts plays such a big role, cooperation (in farming, herding and decision-making) takes precedence over individualism, a rare trait in such societies. This was clear in the Fulas’ attitude toward individual possession. When a villager wants to borrow something, say a scissors, he or she goes to the owner’s house, asks and receives it. If the owner is out, the visitor still takes the scissors. All parties see this as acceptable practice.

This openness extends to land. One night we saw a villager burning a field in preparation for planting. I asked the man, Immagi, I was standing with — those who went to high school spoke English — whose land this was. He, replied, “It’s his if he works on it.” He elaborated, “All land is free.”

Village solidarity is constantly cemented by rituals of hospitality, at weddings, births and in the reception of guests. When we arrived mid-evening, everyone from the compound, from babies toted by mothers to the respected elders, came to our house to welcome us and ask, “How is your day?” The next afternoon we went to each compound to sit, pass the time and eat peanuts.

This, by the way, is the most striking feature of the non-money environment, passing time. Great chunks of the day are reserved for socializing. What one gets in abundance is the time to chat, to discuss, dispute, joke, josh, sing, reminisce and dream with others. The hottest part of the day — average temperature is 90 to 100 degrees year-round — and in the long, breeze-blessed evenings, everyone hangs out.

On the negative side, the Fula have a patriarchal society as evidenced in the fact that the women have more chores. This is true throughout the region. Hyden cites a study that notes women provide nearly three-quarters of the labor in food production. In this village, at least, this is not acutely alienated labor. When women work washing clothes or pounding millet, for instance, it is done in the compound’s open center, under a tree and in company with other women with whom they carry on a lively dialogue. Work and conversation blend.

Let's return to the point about the work cultures of the marginalized. Mike Davis envisions a future in which the ultra-poor, massed into mega-metropolises cling by their fingernails to the unraveling edges of the capitalist system. But de Sousa Santos and his fellow authors argue that, facing an option of generalized immiseration, the excluded are beginning to cast around for alternative economies. The reinvigoration of a still intact subsistence sector offers one such alternative.

But we can go further by providing a more in-depth examination of the state's withering. As suggested, this change does not entail the complete dismantling of government functions, which are immediately taken over by the democratic institutions of the poor. Rather, what is happening in Africa is a tripartite devolution that encompasses: 1) a fundamental reorganization of state structures; 2) a depletion of the government's ability to rule; and 3) a loss of sovereignty.

1. Since independence, most sub-Saharan African countries have been one-party states, headed by corrupt strong men who rule by combining military coercion with the distribution of favors to well-placed followers.

In his study of African political systems, Hyden says that, as in any political system, the most stable one-party states depend more on a network of supportive clients than on violence. The intelligent strong man sees that not only his immediate cronies (who staff the state) but regional and tribal leaders of every significant stripe must be cultivated by financing infrastructural projects (that offer prime opportunities for graft) in their bailiwicks. This creates a rough and ready democracy, though only among elite factions.

But with structural adjustment policies forced upon these nations, this form of government has ceased to exist because funds to sustain the patronage networks are no longer there. In a movement to shore up elite rule, there has been a widespread morphing into multi-party democracies. From 1988 to 1999 the number of states in sub-Saharan Africa featuring multi-party elections went from 9 to 45. This temporarily and cynically solves two problems for state rule.

It restores a patina of legitimacy to a system that can no longer provide either patronage or (see below) welfare services to its citizens, and reinvigorates it by dividing clients among the competing parties, so each political grouping has need to siphon fewer funds since it serves a smaller client base.

2. Another loss of state power is the inability of it to provide minimal welfare to the citizenry, such as education and medical care, which structural adjustment programs eliminate as too costly. While some of these services are taken over by international relief organizations, most that are continued are done so by groups from the distressed society itself. In other words, as Thomson puts it, "Declining state capacity required civil society to increase its self sufficiency." The once-repressed women's groups, trade unions, farmers associations, and other grassroots networks are assuming greater responsibility in social and economic life.

To put this more graphically, let me refer to the Fula village again. In our settlement, there was a women's group made up of females from all 'seven compounds that had set up an organization to sell "soured" milk (something like yogurt), which they took by cab to Banjul and peddled in office buildings. Ideally, as the government becomes less able to provide services, it is groups like this women's band – not merely as entrepreneurs, but as directors of village/city contact – that will come to the fore as more democratic creators of social networks.

3. The state, which at independence, could set economic policies, now has lost this aspect of its sovereignty, since it is now being ruled by the diktats of international monetary agencies. Nonetheless, the very poverty of sub-Saharan Africa means that the retrenchment demanded of the countries there will not equal what is seen in South America. While, for example, in the 1990s, Brazil and Argentina saw the vast proletarianization of their middle classes, Africa does not have a middle class

of any dimension to be downsized. Moreover, many of the African countries (such as The Gambia) lack the infrastructure or valuable natural resources to make them super attractive to the predators of international capital.

Julius Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania after independence, called for an “African road to socialism,” in which his country would return to the communist structures of village life without having to pass through capitalism. His hopes were never realized, but it could be that a different type of social structure is now on the horizon.

The standard history of Western Europe depicts a move from feudal to democratic states, which simultaneously become more representative and extend their reach farther into society. The change in Africa, by contrast, entails a move from dictatorial to more representative democracies, concomitant with a diminishment of the state’s power over society.

So, what about an “African road to anarchism,” whereby the money economy and the state, which are in a condition of partial collapse or withdrawal, cede more and more functions to non-monetarized, non-statist village communities that are organized on the basis of mutual aid? Anything else is Davis’ grim vision of a planet of slums, or worse, a generalized Somalia or Iraq.

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Retrieved on October 26, 2011 from www.anarkismo.net
Originally appeared in Fifth Estate Issue #378, Vol. 43 No. 2, Summer, 2008, page 28

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