AFRICA AGONISTES

Seek ye first the political kingdom, "and all the rest shall be added unto you," exhorted Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first head of state and Africa's premier nationalist.

Now more than 30 years and some 70 coups later, all the rest has not been added—and some things even have been subtracted from Africa. Today, its per-capita income is lower than it was 30 years ago, and 70 percent of the world's poorest nations are in Africa. In his recent **Africa: Dispatches from a Fragile Continent** (Norton, 1990), Blaine Harden of the *Washington Post* notes that if Africa is in last place in many categories, it is unfortunately first in others. Its foreign debt burden is the highest in the world, with interest payments bleeding away one of every three dollars Africans earn. In Africa, civil wars have spawned the world's largest refugee problem. To these difficulties must be added uncontrolled population growth and inadequate food supply: Africa today, writes Harden, "is the most successful producer of babies in recorded history and the world's least successful producer of food."

This dire African situation is a sad contrast to the bright hopes of 30 years ago. That heady period of the late 1950s saw the emergence of an impressive group of men—the poet L. S. Senghor (Senegal), the orator Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), trade union leaders Ahmed Sékou Touré (Guinea) and Tom Mboya (Kenya), and rural radicals like Oginga Odinga (Kenya)—who all used anticolonial grievances to become, at least initially, popular leaders of the newly independent nations. These movements were commonly dubbed "nationalistic" by both African intellectuals and Western social scientists.

James Coleman's **Nigeria: Background to Nationalism** (1958) captured the mood of the buoyant period, while also defining what that nationalism was: only those movements whose political parties had a territorial following (as opposed to a tribal one) and had set up independence as an ultimate goal.

Using nationalist slogans, postcolonial leaders hoped to integrate their subjects. But, as Coleman and Carl Rosberg pointed out in **Political Parties and National Integration in Tropical Africa** (1964), nation building required more than stirring political rhetoric. Modernization was needed, and African leaders were determined to drag, push, bully, or borrow their new nations into the modern world. All modernization theorists, whether liberal or Marxist, shared the assumption expressed by David Apter in **The Politics of Modernization** (1965), namely, that a centralized state on the Western model was needed to coordinate all elements of society and direct development. A second assumption of Apter's was also widely shared (except by Marxists): The centralized state could only succeed with the help of the foreign powers, which would supply technical expertise, loans, and training facilities.

Despite all the fine theories, it became obvious by the end of the 1960s that Africa was *not* developing. A radical pessimism set in, expressed in René Dumont's **False Start in Africa** (Praeger, 1969). Dumont's long chapter headings—such as "Too Many Tractors and Coffee Plants, Not Enough Oil Palms and Food Crops"—are in themselves revealing. They reveal a tendency to blame Africa's failure to develop not on Africa but on outside factors, among them development aid itself. This "defense" of Africa was expressed most violently in Franz Fanon's **Wretched of the Earth** (1965).

The "generation" of social scientists following Dumont and Fanon tried to excuse the Africans' failures by using "dependency" theory, smuggled in from Latin America, to explain the new states' inability to fend for themselves. Thus, Walter Rodney described **How Europe Underdeveloped Africa** (Howard Univ., 1974) through four centuries, from the slave traders of the 16th century to the multinational corporations of our own time. Colin Leys's **Underdevelopment in Kenya: The Political Economy of Neo-Colonialism 1964–1971** (Univ. of Calif., 1974) became the prototypical case study, illustrating how foreign investment dominated the economic structure of the emerging nations, turning the African petty bourgeoisie into little more than agents of these foreign interests. To call the new African nations inde-

pendent was for these social scientists less accurate—and certainly less fashionable—than calling them neocolonial.

Rodney and Leys were only the pioneers of a scholarly industry that showed how foreign influence and foreign aid have failed Africa. But if the original formula for Africa's success envisioned, in addition to foreign aid, a strong centralized state, the record of those states makes an even more appalling tale. The Nigerian political scientist Claude Ake puts the blame, in "Sustaining Development on the Indigenous" (paper prepared for the World Bank, December 1987), on the African states themselves for the "pervasive alienation, the delinking of leaders from followers, a weak sense of national identity, and the perception of the government as a hostile force."

It is easy to see, in retrospect, how those new states connected by only the loosest of ties were ripe for dictators—like Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, Daniel arap Moi in Kenya, and Gnassingbe Eyadema in Togo—who could hold diverse populations and interests together by terror and tyranny and by promoting factions and patrimonialism. While such leaders turned their governments into "kleptocracies," they also promoted a class of middlemen—pictured in Robert Bates's **Markets and States in Tropical Africa: The Political Basis of Agricultural Politics** (Univ. of Calif., 1981)—who further sabotaged any chance for development by collaring concessions, contracts, commissions, kickbacks, and bribes. Jean-Francois Bayart's **L'Etat en Afrique** (Sayard, 1989)—which represents the fruits of French scholarship in the 1980s—proposed a different way of even understanding the African state. With his subtitle, *la politique du ventre*, or "politics of the stomach," Bayart suggested that the African state has become "indigenized," personalized, and custom-designed for manipulation. Any attempt to understand it in European or theoretical or Weberian terms will lead off into a wild goose-chase of miscomprehension.

Is Africa then simply to become the lost continent again, relegated from the Third World into, what Harden calls, "its own bleak category, the Nth World"? Bayart provides a possible way out of this quandary when he proposes bypassing European categories to discover what is indigenous to Africa. Goran Hydan in **No Shortcuts to Progress: African Development Management in Perspective** (Univ. of Calif., 1983) anticipated Bayart when he "open[ed] the door to a field of inquiry that has normally been ignored by writers on Africa." Hydan studied "old-fashioned" peasant methods of production and exchange, particularly in agriculture, that had been ignored—if not despised—by both government planners and foreign-loan officers. Likewise, Robert Chambers in **Rural Development: Putting the Last First** (Longman, 1983) advocated a populist, agricultural-based approach to African development because it represents "the single largest knowledge resource not yet mobilized in the [bankrupt] development enterprise." John Iliffe, in **The Emergence of African Capitalism** (Univ. of Minn., 1983), also found a source of hope in Africa's homegrown enterprises, such as dye and textile manufacture in Nigeria, supported as they were by a complex interaction of business and family and religion. This traditional or indigenous African capitalism, Iliffe noted, supplied methods and "code[s] that helped foster trade and cooperation even in the absence of political unity in late precolonial times."

In going beyond Western notions of capitalism and the state, such scholars are penetrating beneath what V. Y. Mudimbe has described as the European **Invention of Africa** (Indiana Univ., 1988). Harden's *Africa* is the most notable recent attempt "to make the world's poorest continent more understandable—and less piteous—by making it more human." For Harden, Africa's values, especially those centering around family and kinship, do much to counterbalance the continent's vast problems. Those values may be more permanent, he suggests, than the authoritarian political artifice created by the Europeans in their brief 60-year reign in Africa. Instead of writing off the African experiment, Harden subscribes to a graffito scrawled on the backs of African trucks: "No condition is permanent."

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