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The appearance of Zimbabwe: the Political Economy of Transition is welcome. This collection of essays by progressive Zimbabwean scholars, edited by Ibbo Mandaza, a senior official in the Public Service Commission, is a major intervention in the debate on the political economy of independent Zimbabwe. The book seeks to address the main processes and components of that political economy, its directions and contradictions, and the openings it affords for progressive political work.

As the editor signals in his Preface, The Political Economy of Transition is addressed mainly to Zimbabweans. Non-Zimbabweans will do well to read it, however, both for what it says about Zimbabwe in the mid-1980’s, and for the insight it offers on how Zimbabwean scholars see their society.

The book is timely, for its publication coincides roughly with the 1987 constitutional changes which mark the end of the first transitional phase of the politics of independent Zimbabwe. The essays in the collection bring together a wealth of information and argument about a crucial period in the country’s history. Several authors are quite critical of the different aspects of public policy and practice; that such opinions can be published openly speaks well for Zimbabwe. Because it is the first resumé of the political economy of the new nation, and because it comes from a group of Zimbabweans who have nailed their political colours firmly to the mast, the book’s appearance will surely provoke responses from other political positions. For this reason it should advance and enhance the national debate on Zimbabwe’s political directions and possibilities.

The Political Economy of Transition will also serve as an excellent bibliographic resource on Zimbabwe’s political economy. Its twenty-page bibliography contains an extensive listing of published sources (usefully broken down by sectors), unpublished papers, and official documents.

Ultimately, however, this reader found the volume disappointing. It promises more than it finally delivers, insofar as it does not address adequately a number of important theoretical and practical questions about Zimbabwe’s professed socialist project. Perhaps the slightly grandiose title raises the reader’s expectations too much: “the political economy of transition” begs the question, transition to what? There is an answer on the public agenda, for President Mugabe has made explicit his government’s commitment to transforming Zimbabwe into a socialist society. It follows, I think, that an intervention such as this book should address the possibilities
and limits of that project. Yet these essays on ‘transition’ often do so only in a
tangential or oblique fashion, despite their authors’ evident sympathy for
their government’s commitment. Many of the essays tend to describe rather
than explain political-economic processes in the first half-decade of
Zimbabwe’s independence. And crucially, rarely do they offer much
commentary on the implications of such processes for any broader
‘transformationist’ project. Nor, lastly, do they offer much discussion about
the question of political action: what is to be done, by government, by
popular organisations, or by progressive intellectuals.

To say this is not to demand that any volume such as this be exhaustive —
the editor’s proviso (p.x) acknowledges that it is not — but rather to argue
that certain critical issues of transition have been neglected or inadequately
explored.

We will make selective reference to some of the essays to elaborate this
summary critique: space limitations rule out a comment on all of them.

The Political Economy of Transition includes thirteen essays and an
editor’s introduction. The essays are grouped into five ‘sectoral’ clusters: two
on politics (including one by the editor), three on the economy, three on the agrarian question’, two on the labour movement and human resources, and
three on social development. The book’s 430 pages also include a twenty-
page bibliography, as noted above, and an index.

The editor’s introduction is only twenty pages long, but it requires an
extended comment. In any edited collection, the introductory essay plays an
important role in defining the tone and substance of the book as a whole.
Here, what it doesn’t say is probably more important than what it includes.

Ibbo Mandaza’s introduction is subtitled “The Political Economy of
Transition”. Referring to Zimbabwe’s protracted (and continuing) struggle
for genuine independence, and the imperialist threat to it, he asserts that
the book is “an attempt to explain why things are what they are, rather than what
they ought to be” (p.9, emphasis in original). Much of the introduction,
however, is devoted not to, for example, outlining a framework of the
concepts required for such a task, but rather to a polemic against sundry
other scholars and activists who have tried to assess the revolutionary
process in Zimbabwe. John Saul is the principal but certainly not the sole
culprit. Mandaza’s complaint seems to be twofold: first, a critique of the
colonisation of knowledge, and a demand that Africans should write their
own history; secondly, an assertion that Saul and others have got it wrong in
their essentially idealist (in the editor’s words, ‘romantic’) analysis of
revolutionary processes and possibilities in Southern Africa. This latter
argument is also sometimes tinged with the suggestion that they have no
business making the assessment in the first place.

There are two problems with this. First, the editor’s attack on other
activists is so close to an ad hominem barrage that it all too easily deflects the
reader’s attention from what is an unassailable argument: namely, that Africans should write their own history. No reasonable person would disagree — and certainly not John Saul, Horace Campbell, et al.

At least as important, however, is that the editor’s polemic effectively diverts him from the task of explaining Zimbabwe, such is his eagerness to discredit others’ attempts to do so. The book provides a vital opportunity for its authors to establish the conceptual and political terms of debate about Zimbabwe’s political economy, precisely because it is the first and — so far — only comprehensive national intervention in that debate. The introduction offers an opportunity, for example, to show the power of a class analysis to explain Zimbabwe’s special history and current circumstances, and to link these concepts to classical questions about the transition to socialism. In the event, it is an opportunity foregone. Mandaza does not set out much of a framework for understanding the processes, problems, and possibilities of transition in Zimbabwe, and particularly the transition to socialism. This shortcoming hampers other essays in the book — not because they represent diverse points of view, but because the reader has little sense of an overall problematic into which to set the information they provide. Indeed, many of the essays suffer precisely because they offer the reader intrinsically interesting information which, unrelated to a broader theoretical framework, loses some of its power.

To be specific: there is a fairly extensive literature on the postcolonial state, much of it spawned by the experience of societies in East and Central Africa. There is also a substantial literature on socialist experiments in Africa (however one defines these), as well as an important body of literature on the economics of socialist transformation. This reader would have preferred to see a thorough winnowing of these, but the editor offers only limited comment on several important issues they raise. These include:

— the social basis and organisation side of the state, the extent of and prospects for alternative forms of politics, and particularly for popular control of state structures. The central contradiction between popular and imperial interests is properly noted, but there is little else in this vein.

— the role of the party, its ideology, organisation, and social base. What options exist for the party, practically and theoretically, in relation to both the state and other popular organisations such as unions? (It must be noted that the cluster of issues related to the role of the party are barely addressed anywhere in the book, and yet these are obviously crucial to any political project, socialist or otherwise.)

— more generally, the social basis of politics and the conceptual tools for understanding this. If Zimbabwe is enmeshed in a web of imperialist pressures and interests (as the editor convincingly argues, here and elsewhere) then surely the political project to challenge these rests on the internal configuration of class and political forces. A materialist analysis
must address these: it is not a matter of "appropriate planning skills in the state sector" or even "the correct orientation — and political will — to plan for socialism" (p 18), necessary as these are.

- *dependence and transformation*, the options for developing a planned economy that challenges the inherited logic of the market, both domestically and internationally. Zimbabwe’s circumstances are peculiar and problematic, combining a relatively high degree of development of the productive forces with an intimate dependency on regional and global markets dominated by much larger powers. And there is a *political issue* here that cannot be avoided. It is the one raised by Deutscher's critique of the Soviet experience: who pays for accumulation, when the attempt is made to construct socialism in conditions of scarcity?

- *what to do?* How to "identify the possibilities for the development of a progressive development policy?" (p 17). What political space exists for progressive intellectuals? for popular organisations? within and outside the state and party? what limits and possibilities do these imply?

The editor is surely aware of some of these questions, but makes little more than passing reference to them. Some exploration of them, conversely, could have provided a framework within which the different authors could address more sharply the problem of transition in the specific sectors they analyse.

The book’s first essay, by the editor, surveys the historical origins and current dynamics of the state in Zimbabwe. It seeks to provide an overview which sets the broad political context of the essays which follow. Like the introduction, its prominence in the book (as well as its fifty-odd pages) lends an importance that calls for close scrutiny.

Mandaza defines the state as a “post-white settler colonial state”, a cumbersome phrase, but useful in suggesting specific characteristics. The essay provides a very competent and succinct summary of the evolution of the colonial state, as well as a reflection of the weaknesses and contradictions of the liberation movement. (The latter is described, correctly I think, as a radical nationalist movement with, at best, a socialist idiom.) Mandaza also explains well the net of imperial forces at work in the decolonisation process, emphasising that the outcome at Lancaster House was an expression of the balance of political forces at work. His emphasis on the essential continuity of state structures, and the safeguard thus provided for imperial interests, is also appropriate. He asserts the emergence since 1980, and its subsequent political dominance, of a petty bourgeoisie, a class owing its prominence and power primarily to its control of state and parastatal institutions and, in some instances, its alliance as junior partner with domestic and international capital. It follows too that this class will be little help in any socialist project.

The essay is forcefully argued and, as far as it goes, convincing. The almost exclusive focus on the petty bourgeoisie has serious limitations, however. It
is a theoretical weakness with political consequences. In the Marxist tradition of discourse social classes exist only in relation to one another, and hence must be analysed as such. The state in capitalist society is thus an arena of class struggle — an instrument of class power, a locus of class formation, to be sure, but also object and terrain for contending political forces. Mandaza’s analysis, however, in its preoccupation with imperial interests on one hand and petty-bourgeois political consolidation on the other, has little to say about the dominated classes of Zimbabwean society and their relation to the state. Yet unless a writer takes account of the constraints and possibilities of that interaction, a ‘class’ becomes a free-floating, ahistorical political force. This indeed, is the impression conveyed by Mandaza’s account. For this reason, it comes uncomfortably close to elite analysis as practised by orthodox political science.

There is also a certain determinism at work. The account of politics before 1980 is presented with some verve; the reader sees people and organisations at loggerheads over who shall govern. The account of the independence years, unfortunately, loses that sense of human agency. The petty bourgeoisie appears to spring more or less fully grown from the womb of Lancaster House, and the main question to be answered, it seems, is what relationship it will develop with the agents of capital. The editor’s introductory protestations notwithstanding, therefore, there is little here by way of a materialist analysis (in terms of the social base of the nationalist movement, for example) to explain why an emergent petty-bourgeois class has secured power. Nor, in the absence of an exploration of the contradictory relations between this grouping and the popular classes — in the Marxist canon, the wellspring of social change — does the reader have a sense of the possible trajectories of social and political change.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, this conceptual weakness has political consequences: the account offers little guidance on the practical question of what to do. There is little explanation of the incipient divisions within the petty bourgeoisie, or of their implications in terms of political space for popular initiative. (The fact of division is noted, but little else.) Nor does the reader gain a sense of what class base (if any) exists for the political project of transformation. Likewise, there is little analysis of popular organisation, particularly of the party and its mobilising potential — no comment at all, for example, about why the politicisation of ethnicity has been so prevalent, with all its divisiveness (problems of inertia and stagnation are mentioned and deplored, but there is little else). There is a very real political problem to be addressed: as a former ZANLA cadre once put it to me, ZANU-PF mobilised the people very effectively politically, for independence, but hardly at all for the economic struggle to follow. These are critical issues if one understands transition as primarily a matter of political struggle, not policy.
In the absence (in this account) of any potential popular motive force, Mandaza is forced to identify the impetus for progressive change as, in effect, individual preoccupations (p 51). He invokes a putative “progressive nationalist” grouping within the petty bourgeoisie as agents of change: not unlike the analysis of Tanzania once offered by Saul! Yet Mandaza offers no compelling explanation of why such a grouping should exist, nor why they should act as he hopes they will.

The essay concludes with a reiteration of the inherent contradiction between the imperial interests embodied in the state and its petty-bourgeois intendants, and the aspirations of the mass of Zimbabwe’s people. The writer evokes a vision of the “inexorable and inevitable rising tide of the oppressed”. Yet, without any prior analysis of the oppressed, nor explanation why their revolt is both inexorable and inevitable, this sounds very much like the dreaded “revolutionary romanticism”. “The people” stride onto the political stage — but almost as an exogenous force. Surely the analysis of the postcolonial state requires a fuller account of popular interests and organisations?

The three essays on the economy include Xavier Kadhani’s overview of recent developments, Theresa Chimombe’s account of the place of foreign capital, and Dan Ndlela’s assessment of prospects for industrialisation. They are complementary, and present a good deal of information on the current state of the economy. While posing some important questions, however, the authors refrain from close investigation of key issues inherent in the notion of ‘transition’.

Xavier Kadhani’s piece exemplifies the problem. He has written a fluent and comprehensive survey of major economic developments since 1980. He pays comparatively little attention to the politics of economic policy, but still identifies questions which are crucial for any ‘transformationist’ project, or any political economy of transition. He notes on p 99, for example, that ‘transformation’ entered the political lexicon in the early ’80’s, but did not take on any clear operational meaning. The reader immediately asks why. What does this apparent paradox say about the presence of a strategy for transformation? Or were there a range of contending ‘operational meanings’, with none pre- eminent?

To cite a further example: reviewing the Transitional Development Plan on pp 101-02, Kadhani notes the absence of an effective planning mechanism, and asks, correctly, whether “it is meaningful to ‘plan’ an economy [in] which ownership and control of the productive assets reside in private hands, and foreign private hands in large measure at that”. This gets at the essence of the problem: what options exist for transforming an underdeveloped economy which is, in the main, foreign-owned? Kadhani calls this an “ideological’ problem, and, having noted it, drops it — or, more
accurately, leaves it for the Five-Year Plan to answer. Yet it forces to the surface issues that call for but don’t receive examination. These include the structural constraints (both external and domestic) on the development of an autonomous socialist economy; the range of economic options; and the political base for striving for any of these. His excellent summary, finally, of the embrace of orthodox fiscal policy, with the budget gradually taking priority as the main instrument of economic policy, only begs more questions. What political and economic forces led to this? Now that it has happened, what does it imply for any future ‘transition’?

It’s at this point — to return to an earlier theme — that the limitations of the book’s introduction become apparent. Surely a more comprehensive conceptual framework, one which outlined the important theoretical and practical questions, would have placed a deserved priority on the problems Kadhani poses. Without that, the issues once raised are left dangling.

Two of the essays on agriculture I found to be best read as a single unit, with Clever Mubengegwi’s “Continuity and Change in Agricultural Policy” preceding Sam Moyo’s exploration of “The Land Question”. This reverses the order of their appearance in the text. Mubengegwi’s piece provides a necessary explanatory framework (namely, the essential continuity of agricultural policy) for Moyo’s work. The latter essay provides an extensive and up-to-date summary of the main patterns of land usage in Zimbabwe, and emphasises the limited degree of real change in these since 1980. Moyo also notes the process of rural differentiation which is going on in Zimbabwe’s Communal Areas, in the wake of agrarian reforms that have given greater priority to peasant agriculture. But, the essay on “the land question” has an oddly anonymous cast to it offering little explanation of the origins of the processes at work, which are themselves described well enough.

Mubengegwi’s account of policy provides the necessary complement. His is one of the stronger essays in the book, and contains, unlike most others, some exploration of the implications for socialist transformation of the policy he analyses. This latter section is suggestive rather than complete, however, and could well have been elaborated. He hints at the critical question of what interests have supported an essential continuity with colonial policy, noting the role of the state as “mediator between the conflicting interests of two agrarian classes” (p 219). His concluding note about the difficulty of developing a strategy for socialising agriculture, for example, indicates the need to extend his own analysis: how much could a ‘mediating’ state be the instrument of transformation? He does suggest that the true picture might emerge in the next few years, when constitutional constraints have fallen away; equally, however, the logic of his own convincing argument suggests that the very continuity he identifies may well have settled the issue already.
Thomas Shopo's essay on "The Political Economy of Hunger", conversely, I found to be quite impenetrable. He asserts the need to reject a 'market-based approach' to the problem of hunger, and to establish an understanding of widespread hunger and ill health as integral parts of the process of capitalist accumulation — but never does so. On the contrary, the author seems to get so wrapped up in turning phrases (usually derogatory) about others' 'market-based' analyses that he never actually answers the questions he poses. Asking "what are the basic institutional causes of hunger?" for example, he decries the answers of agronomists, legal scientists and historians, lamenting their preoccupation with outmoded paradigms — but doesn't get around to a competing explanation. There is an obvious starting point, of course: any economic system that relies on the exploitation of labour power as a commodity to produce surplus value for those who control production will almost certainly generate hunger within the labouring class, whether it produces food and other agricultural products, or widgets. Thus, the fact of hunger in the midst of food surpluses is hardly to be wondered at. Shopo, however, cannot summon up an explanation even at this level of generality. What can one make of such an essay? It is pretentious in the extreme, and the irony is staggering when the author complains about a "failure to communicate" the real economic laws generating hunger.

Lloyd Sachikonwe and Brian Raftopoulos offer two well-written essays on labour. Sachikonwe's piece is important because it is the only one in the book to look at popular organisation — namely, the labour movement. Addressing the relations among state, capital, and unions, he draws attention to the historical and contemporary weakness of the trade union movement in Zimbabwe, and its vulnerable position vis-a-vis both capital and the state. He describes the struggle of the labour movement since 1980, and the modest advance achieved by the passing of the Labour Relations Act of 1985 — modest because its guarantees of workers' rights are hedged by its provisions for sweeping interventionist powers for the state.

The concluding paragraphs of his essay raise some important issues that warrant further exploration. From the self-evident premise that "a bourgeois state and its apparatus cannot implement socialist labour policies", Sachikonwe asserts that the appearance of a socialist labour movement will hinge on working-class political activism and leadership. The historical experience his own work describes, however, shows little past evidence of this. What would be required to encourage it in the future? What are the practical possibilities of doing so? And, in the absence of a mobilised working class, what prospects exist for any transformative project? Such questions highlight the implications of the history and relationships he presents, which this reader would have liked to see addressed in more detail.

Brian Raftopoulos surveys Zimbabwe's policy and practice in the field of
human resource development: manpower and education planning. He notes the achievements, especially the National Manpower Survey, which showed the extent of the pool of skills within Zimbabwe’s black population, and schemes such as the artisanal upgrading programme which followed from this. He recognises (much more than is often the case with articles in this field) the centrality of private capital: so long as production is largely controlled by international capital, the demand for skills is shaped by its accumulative requirements. “Meaningful human resource planning” thus becomes very difficult (p 297); indeed, he might have gone further to say that any coherent strategy beyond Africanising current job hierarchies is probably impossible in the absence of any broader approach to transforming production. His piece does suggest, if only implicitly, that considerable resources exist to support such a strategy, if and as it is developed. Equally, however — and this begs the question not only of what a longer-term socialist human strategy would look like, but who would develop it — the Africanisation of essentially unchanged state structures has created a bureaucratically-based petty bourgeoisie which has little objective interest in a transformative strategy. The short-term achievement in manning the state may have diverted (if not pre-empted) longer-term avenues for change.

The book concludes with three essays related to social development. Rungano Zvobgo and Sam Agere survey the huge strides made in expanding and democratising the education and health care systems. Zvobgo also points to the sizeable social and financial problems that will follow, given the limited growth in the economy as a whole. These include both the problem of financing the enormous recurrent costs of vastly expanded systems, and the suffering which a generation of educated unemployed will sooner or later face. He might usefully have also underscored the difficulty of genuinely transforming education systems. Other nations’ experience is instructive here. Fifteen years ago, for example, and facing similar problems, Zambia undertook a far-reaching examination of its own system (essentially the same as Zimbabwe’s) and produced a detailed plan for sweeping reform. Its fate bears examining: it foundered on political opposition from a petty-bourgeois class not so very different from that identified by Mandaza and Raftopoulos.

Joyce Kazembe’s essay on “The Women Issue”, the last in the book, is a tidy little essay written in a confident and often colloquial style. She focuses her attention on the cluster of patriarchal relations historically embedded in room, and on the opportunity for challenging these offered by recent legal changes, notably the Legal Age of Majority Act of 1982 and the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1985. Her essay could be strengthened by extending her final section, “Women and Politics” to include an examination of the problem of political organisation. What kind of movement would be needed for women to seize the opportunities afforded by legal change? What organisational
form might it take, and what are the practical possibilities for its development? Some comment on these issues — difficult ones, admittedly — would have rounded off the essay.

Unfortunately, Kazembe's essay is the only place in the text where gender is addressed. This is a serious shortcoming, no less so because it is so common. Most of the sectoral essays require an analysis of gender in the social relations they seek to portray; none provide it. The pieces on agriculture, for example, are incomplete without an exposition of the place of female labour within agricultural systems past and present. Current processes of rural class formation have an important and inescapable gender dimension, but none of the authors acknowledges it. Any analysis of labour and trade unions in their relation with capital, furthermore, should comment on the role of women as domestic labour (within both migrant labour systems and an urbanised working class) and as major actors in the so-called 'informal sector'. In light of the power of the feminist critique of both orthodox and Marxist paradigms, it is astonishing that a book published in the mid-1980's should bear so little evidence of that critique.

As a final comment, two stylistic points should be made. First, the text abounds with typographical errors. Usually, these are only irritants (column headings are transposed, etc) but sometimes they are more substantive in their implications: class 'factions' and 'fractions' get confused, for example. Secondly, most if not all essays would have been strengthened — their argument more easily grasped — by some editorial insistence on the authors presenting a thesis, or organising theme, at the beginning of each essay. Often, these appear only in concluding sections, thus asking the reader to reconstruct the logic of the piece.

In conclusion, we have an uneven book. The mere appearance of The Political Economy of Transition is an important political statement; its authors' commitment is thus to be commended. In addition, it presents a wealth of information on Zimbabwe today. For that reason alone it would be required reading. But this reader found that it largely failed to address many of the most interesting and critical questions related to transition; and this failure was all the more frustrating because most of those are flagged at one point or another in the text. This shortcoming is the more obvious, too, because of the large claims made for the book in its early pages — a more modest proclamation would have been in order.

Reviewed by Nick Orwood, Harare.

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Perhaps the main characteristic of the book is detail, massive detail, not only about debates on official aid but about development in general. It has an excellent summary of the development literature and could be recommended for this reason alone.

But what does the author set out to do? Part I of the book focuses on whether there is a moral case for official aid to Third World countries. The author's task became that of presenting, discussing and evaluating the arguments of those critics who challenge the view that there is a moral obligation for donor government's to provide aid, those who say such aid does not help either in its present form or even at all, and those that say moral arguments are irrelevant to government action (p 75). At the end of lengthy and sometimes circuitous arguments the author comes down to the view that "the case for aid and the case against the critics can be sustained without aid's mistakes and uncertainties being concealed" (my emphasis). We will come back to this later.

Part II, which deals with the theoretical debates in foreign aid, is excellent in providing a survey of the development literature from the 1950s to the present. Both 'leftist' criticisms and those from the right are analysed and refuted. With reference to both the pessimistic dependency theorists and to the optimistic Warrenites, the author concludes that "neither theoretical perspective has satisfied scholars as providing an adequate explanation of the manner of dynamic Third World development" (p 137). On the role and nature of the state the author attacks both the 'negative determinism' of the dependency school and the naïve optimistic determinism that 'all will turn out all right in the end'. Instead, the author tells us, "the theoretical literature on the role of the state suggests that there is no general and predictable pattern of state activity that can lead to firm and uncontestable conclusions". What is required, he says, "is a case-by-case analysis to determine within particular circumstances how far the state in particular countries is autonomous, how far it wishes to support aid programmes targeted to poverty alleviation, how far the economic structure inhibits redistributive growth, and how far that structure can change and in what directions" (pp 148-144). The writer also has some tough words for rightist critics and 'market' theologians whose fundamental thesis is that promoting economic development requires not aid but policies that promote the extension and penetration of market forces and a greater role for the private sector. He writes, "there is . . . no theoretical justification for arguing, as the rightist critics do, that a switch to greater market discipline, a more significant role for the private sector, and a deregulated price system will necessarily be more advantageous for Third World development" (p 169).
In Part III, the writer assesses the evidence on the performance of aid in practice. The basic question he examines is: does an assessment of what aid has done, or not done, support or challenge the views of the critics? The author, while admitting that there is plenty of evidence to indicate aid's inadequacies, especially in the alleviation of poverty, nevertheless argues that a strong case can be made for aid. Part of aid's failure, he suggests, lies in the very nature of underdevelopment itself. Chapter 15 is devoted to discussing aid evaluations that use quantitative and qualitative micro-data to make conclusions about the impact of aid. But the author refuses to accept that evidence which shows that aid does not work necessarily means that aid has failed. He says (p 204), it is only if aid can be shown not to have worked, and not to be capable of working in the future, and that an alternative strategy would work, that the perspective of the critics of aid will have been vindicated. Readers are also reminded that there are many different kinds or forms of aid ranging from technical assistance to food aid. If one form fails another may succeed. Moreover, poorer countries tend to be characterised by greater uncertainties, weaker institutions, fewer socio-economic linkages and greater vulnerability to external influences. Under these conditions aid is likely to achieve less. According to the author, "the point is not to condone waste and to justify misuse of funds, rather it is to highlight the risky and uncertain environment in which any policy intervention, including aid, is carried out" (p 205). So much for the strong points of the book. What about the weak points?

While the author points out some of the limitations of the discussions about aid performance, in particular that it "takes place in a sanitised world of the donor and perfect recipient where wider political, foreign policy, strategic, commercial, and economic influences are not considered" (p 206), he himself gives only cursory attention to such influences. A small section — pp 206-212 — is devoted to discussing the impact of these wider influences on aid effectiveness — for example, giving aid to friendly or, more commonly, 'client' states, or those that adopt recommended policy reforms; using aid to promote donor economic interests through, for example, tied-aid, with the attendant distortions and costs to recipient countries; other non-aid specific policies of donor countries.

While the less than altruistic motives of donors are mentioned, they are not really subjected to detailed analysis and critique. For example, in discussing the lack of donor coordination as a factor contributing to aid effectiveness the author says "there is no doubt that one major inhibiting factor here is the manner in which donor self-interest (political, strategic, commercial) influences the direction and destination of aid resources, the quantity of funds allocated to different recipients over time, and the form in which aid is provided. Especially where these interests are dominant they can and do considerably lessen the developmental impact of official aid,
either directly through the ‘misuse’ of aid funds or indirectly through the pursuit of mutually conflicting policies, for instance in the case of trade protectionism. In recent years, the United States, Japan, West Germany and Britain have all increased the impact of their (different) goals of self-interest to the detriment of aid’s developmental impact” (p 206). This is the first time that the author alluded to one of the thorniest issues in the North-South relationship — trade protectionism. This important theme — the call by developing countries for more open trade not tied aid — is not at all developed in the book. The problems of the commercialisation of aid, the dumping of excess food surpluses, and the immense pressures on Third World countries to open up their economies while donor countries do not do so are mentioned only in passing.

In discussing ways of improving the effectiveness of aid the writer pinpoints two important areas: the nature of recipient government policies — that recipient governments should spell out more clearly the gap-filling role of foreign aid; and, secondly, donor coordination in identifying and quantifying those constraints that impede aid effectiveness. The second area is rather controversial. What should be the role of donors in shaping the broad policy environment in aid-recipient countries? Where should the line be drawn between ‘helping’ and actually interfering in the domestic policymaking process of recipient countries? The author appears to see no real danger of donor interference when he says “donors could well have a crucial role in devising, drawing up and helping to implement such a policy framework” (p 275). Many Third World countries have serious misgivings about the involvement of donors in the determination of their domestic policies and priorities, which have in some cases gone beyond what could be justified by the need to protect current loans and guarantee their responsible use. This preoccupation with ‘control’ by most donors is reflected by the fact that most bilateral aid is still in the form of project lending whereas the needs of Third World countries are for programme aid — flexibly usable funds which are not tied to specific investment projects.

One other area of concern to many recipient countries, and which is not discussed by the author, is the often slow rate of disbursements of assistance already pledged (this was a major problem with Zimbabwe’s Zimtrnd funds). This is usually due to the insistence by donors that the recipients create and maintain an acceptable pipeline of projects and supply performance reports of almost impossible standards. Many Third World countries do not have the capacity or expertise to meet such conditions.

In a leading chapter (16) the writer considers what he terms the ‘bedrock’ question about foreign aid: is it, or is it capable of, reaching and assisting the poor in aid-recipient countries? But who are the poor or poorest is never clearly spelt out. The author clearly avoids mentioning class as a category of analysis, so that the discussion remains vague and generalised.
The point, in my view, is not to ask whether aid should be given or not or whether there is a moral obligation to give aid or not. The fact is that some resource flows are taking place, for all sorts of reasons. The role of progressive social scientists should be to analyse and expose the 'aid business'. We need on-going research on the effects and consequences of aid. Discussion about the reform of aid must obviously go on. Many developing countries could do with more concessionary aid — not tied to particular projects, to orders from particular countries, or to any economic policy. The most important issue is: what are the conditions which are necessary for the effective utilisation of genuine aid? One such is that we need a redistribution of productive wealth to give more wealth, and hence economic power, to the poor and underprivileged classes so that they can participate more effectively in decision-making about development.

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